FENTON'S QUEST.

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FENTON'S QUEST

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FENTON'S QUEST

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET'

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON

WARD, LOCK, AND TYLER

WARWICK HOUSE, PATERNOSTER ROW

1871

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FENTON'S QUEST.

CHAPTER I.

FACE TO FACE.

Gilbert Fenton left the homely little post-office and turned into the lane leading to Golder's-green —a way which may have been pleasant enough in summer, but had no especial charm at this time. The level expanse of bare ploughed fields on each side of the narrow road had a dreary look; the hedges were low and thin; a tall elm, with all its lower limbs mercilessly shorn, uplifted its topmost branches to the dull gray sky, here and there, like some transformed prophetess raising her gaunt arms in appeal or malediction; an occasional five-barred gate marked the entrance to some byroad across the farm; on one side of the way a deep black-looking ditch lay

under the scanty shelter of the low hedge, and hinted at possible water-rats to the traveller from cities who might happen to entertain a fastidious aversion to such small deer.

The mile seemed a very long one to Gilbert Fenton. Since his knowledge of Sir David Forster's ownership of the house to which he was going, his impatience was redoubled. He had a feverish eagerness to come at the bottom of this mystery. That Sir David had lied to him, he had very little doubt. Whoever this Mr. Holbrook was, it was more likely that he should have escaped the notice of Lidford people as a guest at Heatherly than under any other circumstances. At Heatherly it was such a common thing for strangers to come and go, that even the rustic gossips had left off taking much interest in the movements of the Baronet or his guests. There was one thought that flashed suddenly into Gilbert's mind during that gloomy walk under the lowering gray sky.

If this man Holbrook were indeed a friend of Sir David Forster's, how did it happen that John Saltram had failed to recognise his name? The intimacy between Forster and Saltram was of

such old standing, that it seemed scarcely likely that any acquaintance of Sir David's could be completely unknown to the other. Were they all united in treachery against him? Had his chosen friend—the man he loved so well—been able to enlighten him, and had he coldly withheld his knowledge? No, he told himself, that was not possible. Sir David Forster might be the falsest, most unprincipled of mankind; but he could not believe John Saltram capable of baseness, or even coldness, towards him.

He was at the end of his journey by this time. The Grange stood in front of him—a great rambling building, with many gables, gray lichen-grown walls, and quaint old diamond-paned casements in the upper stories. Below, the windows were larger, and had an Elizabethan look, with patches of stained glass here and there. The house stood back from the road, with a spacious old-fashioned garden before it; a garden with flower-beds of a Dutch design, sheltered from adverse winds by dense hedges of yew and holly; a pleasant old garden enough, one could fancy, in summer weather. The flower-beds were for the most part empty now,

and the only flowers to be seen were pale faded-looking chrysanthemums and Michaelmas daisies. The garden was surrounded by a high wall, and Gilbert contemplated it first through the rusty scroll-work of a tall iron gate, surmounted by the arms and monogram of the original owner. On one side of the house there was a vast pile of building, comprising stables and coach-houses, barns and granaries, arranged in a quadrangle. The gate leading into this quadrangle was open, and Gilbert saw the cattle standing knee-deep in a straw-yard.

He rang a bell, which had a hoarse rusty sound, as if it had not been rung very often of late; and after he had waited for some minutes, and rung a second time, a countrified-looking woman emerged from the house, and came slowly along the wide moss-grown gravel-walk towards him. She stared at him with the broad open stare of rusticity, and did not make any attempt to open the gate, but stood with a great key in her hand, waiting for Gilbert to speak.

'This is Sir David Forster's house, I believe,' he said.

'Yes, sir, it be; but Sir David doesn't live here.'

'I know that. You have some lodgers here —a lady and gentleman called Holbrook.'

He plunged at once at this assertion, as the easiest way of arriving at the truth. He had a conviction that this solitary farmhouse was the place to which his unknown rival had brought Marian.

'Yes, sir,' the woman answered, still staring at him in her slow stupid way. 'Mrs. Holbrook is here, but Mr. Holbrook is away up in London. Did you wish to see the lady?'

Gilbert's heart gave a great throb. She was here, close to him! In the next minute he would be face to face with her, with that one woman whom he loved, and must continue to love, until the end of his life.

'Yes,' he said eagerly, 'I wish to see her. You can take me to her at once. I am an old friend. There is no occasion to carry in my name.'

He had scarcely thought of seeing Marian until this moment. It was her husband he had come to seek; it was with him that his reckoning was to be made; and any meeting between Marian and himself was more likely to prove a

hindrance to this reckoning than otherwise. But the temptation to seize the chance of seeing her again was too much for him. Whatever hazard there might be to his scheme of vengeance in such an encounter slipped out of his mind before the thought of looking once more at that idolised face, of hearing the loved voice once again.

The woman hesitated for a few moments, telling Gilbert that Mrs. Holbrook never had visitors, and she did not know whether she would like to see him; but on his administering half-a-crown through the scroll-work of the gate, she put the key in the lock and admitted him. He followed her along the moss-grown path to a wide wooden porch, over which the ivy hung like a voluminous curtain, and through a half-glass door into a low roomy hall, with massive dark oak-beams across the ceiling, and a broad staircase of ecclesiastical aspect leading to a gallery above. The house had evidently been a place of considerable grandeur and importance in days gone by; but everything in it bore traces of neglect and decay. The hall was dark and cold, the wide fireplace empty, the iron dogs red with rust. Some sacks of grain were

stored in one corner, a rough carpenter's bench stood under one of the mullioned windows, and some garden-seeds were spread out to dry in another.

The woman opened a low door at the end of this hall, and ushered Gilbert into a sitting-room with three windows looking out upon a Dutch bowling-green, a quadrangle of smooth turf shut-in by tall hedges of holly. The room was empty, and the visitor had ample leisure to examine it while the woman went to seek Mrs. Holbrook.

It was a large room with a low ceiling, and a capacious old-fashioned fireplace, where a rather scanty fire was burning in a dull slow way. The furniture was old and worm-eaten, — furniture that had once been handsome, — and was of a ponderous fashion that defied time. There was a massive oaken cabinet on one side of the room, a walnut-wood bureau with brass handles on the other. A comfortable-looking sofa, of an antiquated design, with chintz-covered cushions, had been wheeled near the fireplace; and close beside it there was a small table with an open desk upon it, and some papers scattered loosely about.

There were a few autumn flowers in a homely vase upon the centre table, and a work-basket with some slippers, in Berlin-wool work, unfinished.

Gilbert Fenton contemplated all these things with supreme tenderness. It was here that Marian had lived for so many months—alone most likely for the greater part of the time. He had a fixed idea that the man who had stolen his treasure was some dissipated worldling, altogether unworthy so sacred a trust. The room had a look of loneliness to him. He could fancy the long solitary hours in this remote seclusion.

He had to wait for some little time, walking slowly up and down; very eager for the interview that was to come, yet with a consciousness that his fate would seem only so much the darker to him afterwards, when he had to turn his back upon this place, with perhaps no hope of ever seeing Marian again. At last there came a light footfall; the door was opened, and his lost love came into the room.

Gilbert Fenton was standing near the fireplace, with his back to the light. For the first few moments it was evident that Marian did not

recognise him. She came towards him slowly, with a wondering look in her face, and then stopped suddenly with a faint cry of surprise.

'You here!' she exclaimed. 'O, how did you find this place? Why did you come?'

She clasped her hands, looking at him in a half-piteous way that went straight to his heart. What he had told Mrs. Branston was quite true. It was not in him to be angry with this girl. Whatever bitterness there might have been in his mind until this moment fled away at sight of her. His heart had no room for any feeling but tenderness and pity.

'Did you imagine that I should rest until I had seen you once more, Marian? Did you suppose I should submit to lose you without hearing from your own lips why I have been so unfortunate?'

'I did not think you would waste time or thought upon any one so wicked as I have been towards you,' she answered slowly, standing before him with a pale sad face and downcast eyes. 'I fancied that whatever love you had ever felt for me—and I know how well you did love me—would perish in a moment when you found how

basely I had acted. I hoped that it would be so.'

'No, Marian; love like mine does not perish so easily as that. O, my love, my love, why did you forsake me so cruelly? What had I done to merit your desertion of me?'

'What had you done! You had only been too good to me. I know that there is no excuse for my sin. I have prayed that you and I might never meet again. What can I say? From first to last I have been wrong. From first to last I have acted weakly and wickedly. I was flattered and gratified by your affection for me; and when I found that my dear uncle had set his heart upon our marriage, I yielded against my own better reason, which warned me that I did not love you as you deserved to be loved. Then for a long time I was blind to the truth. I did not examine my own heart. I was quite able to estimate all your noble qualities, and I fancied that I should be very happy as your wife. But you must remember that at the last, when you were leaving England, I asked you to release me, and told you that it would be happier for both of us to be free.'

'Why was that, Marian?'

'Because at that last moment I began to doubt my own heart.'

'Had there been any other influence at work, Marian? Had you seen your husband, Mr. Holbrook, at that time?'

She blushed crimson, and the slender hands nervously clasped and unclasped themselves before she spoke.

'I cannot answer that question,' she said at last.

'That is quite as good as saying "yes." You had seen this man; he had come between us already. O, Marian, Marian, why were you not more candid?'

'Because I was weak and foolish. I could not bear to make you unhappy. O, believe me, Gilbert, I had no thought of falsehood at that time. I fully meant to be true to my promise, come what might.'

'I am quite willing to believe that,' he answered gently. 'I believe that you acted from first to last under the influence of a stronger will than your own. You can see that I feel no resentment against you. I come to you in sorrow, not in anger. But I want to understand how this

thing came to pass. Why was it that you never wrote to me to tell me the complete change in your feelings?'

'It was thought better not,' Marian faltered, after a pause.

'By you?'

'No; by my husband.'

'And you suffered him to dictate to you in this matter, against your own sense of right?'

'I loved him,' she answered simply. 'I have never refused to obey him in anything. I will own that I thought it would be better to write and tell you the truth; but my husband thought otherwise. He wished our marriage to remain a secret from you, and from all the world for some time to come. He had his own reasons for that —reasons I was bound to respect. I cannot think how you came to discover this out-of-the-world place.'

'I have taken some trouble to find you, Marian, and it is a hard thing to find you the wife of another; but the bitterness of it must be borne. I do not want to reproach you when I tell you that my life has been broken utterly by this blow. I want you to believe in my truth and honour, to

trust me now as you might have trusted me when you first discovered that you could not love me. Since I am not to be your husband, let me be the next best thing—your friend. The day may come in which you will have need of an honest man's friendship.'

She shook her head sadly.

'You are very good,' she said; 'but there is no possibility of friendship between you and me. If you will only say that you can forgive me for the great wrong I have done you, there will be a heavy burden lifted from my heart; and whatever you may think now, I cannot doubt that in the future you will find some one far better worthy of your love than ever I could have been.'

'That is the stereotyped form of consolation, Marian, a man is always referred to—that shadowy and perfect creature who is to appear in the future, and heal all his wounds. There will be no such after-love for me. I staked all when I played the great game; and have lost all. But why cannot I be your friend, Marian?'

'Can you forgive my husband for his part in the wrong that has been done you? Can you be his friend, knowing what he has done?'

'No!' Gilbert answered fiercely between his set teeth. 'I can forgive your weakness, but not the man's treachery.'

'Then you can never be mine,' Marian said firmly.

'Remember I am not talking of a common friendship, a friendship of daily association. I offer myself to you as a refuge in the hour of trouble, a counsellor in perplexity, a brother always waiting in the background of your life to protect or serve you. Of course, it is quite possible you may never have need of protection or service—God knows, I wish you all happiness—but there are not many lives quite free from trouble, and the day may come in which you will want a friend.'

'If it ever does, I will remember your goodness.'

Gilbert looked scrutinisingly at Marian Holbrook as she stood before him with the cold gray light of the sunless day full upon her face. He wanted to read the story of her life in that beauful face, if it were possible. He wanted to know whether she was happy with the man who had stolen her from him.

She was very pale, but that might be fairly attributed to the agitation caused by his presence. Gilbert fancied that there was a careworn look in her face, and that her beauty had faded a little since those peaceful days at Lidford, when these two had wasted the summer hours in idle talk under the walnut-trees in the Captain's garden. She was dressed very plainly in black. There was no coquettish knot of ribbon at her throat; no girlish trinkets dangled at her waist—all those little graces and embellishments of costume which seem natural to a woman whose life is happy were wanting in her toilet to-day; and slight as these indications were, Gilbert did not overlook them.

Did he really wish her to be happy—happy with the rival he so fiercely hated? He had said as much; and in saying so, he had believed that he was speaking the truth. But he was only human; and it is just possible that, tenderly as he still loved this girl, he may have been hardly capable of taking pleasure in the thought of her happiness.

'I want you to tell me about your husband, Marian,' he said after a pause; 'who and what he is.'

'Why should I do that?' she asked, looking at him with a steady, almost defiant, expression. 'You have said that you will never forgive him. What interest can you possibly feel in his affairs?'

'I am interested in him upon your account.'

'I cannot tell you anything about him. I do not know how you could have discovered even his name.'

'I learned that at Wygrove, where I first heard of your marriage.'

'Did you go to Wygrove, then?'

'Yes; I have told you that I spared no pains to find you. Nor shall I spare any pains to discover the history of the man who has wronged me. It would be wiser for you to be frank with me, Marian. Rely upon it that I shall sooner or later learn the secret underlying this treacherous business.'

'You profess to be my friend, and yet are avowedly my husband's enemy. Why cannot you be truly generous, Gilbert, and pardon him? Believe me, he was not willingly treacherous; it was his fate to do you this wrong.'

'A poor excuse for a man, Marian. No, my charity will not stretch far enough for that. But

I do not come to you quite on a selfish errand, to speak solely of my own wrongs. I have something to tell you of real importance to yourself.'

'What is that?'

Gilbert Fenton described the result of his first advertisement, and his acquaintance with Jacob Nowell.

'It is my impression that this old man is rich, Marian; and there is little doubt that he would leave all he possesses to you, if you went to him at once.'

'I do not care very much about money for my own sake,' she answered with rather a mournful smile; 'but we are not rich, and I should be glad of anything that would improve my husband's position. I should like to see my grandfather: I stand so much alone in the world that it would be very sweet to me to find a near relation.'

'Your husband must surely have seen Mr. Nowell's advertisement,' Gilbert said after a pause. 'It was odd that he did not tell you about it—that he did not wish you to reply to it.'

'The advertisement may have escaped him, or he may have looked upon it as a trap to discover our retreat,' Marian answered frankly.

'I cannot understand the motive for such secrecy.'

'There is no occasion that you should understand it. Every life has its own mystery—its peculiar perplexities. When I married my husband, I was prepared to share all his troubles. I have been obedient to him in everything.'

'And has your marriage brought you happiness, Marian?'

'I love my husband,' she answered with a plaintive reproachful look, as if there had been a kind of cruelty in his straight question. 'I do not suppose that there is such a thing as perfect happiness in the world.'

The answer was enough for Gilbert Fenton. It told him that this girl's life was not all sunshine.

He had not the heart to push his inquiries farther. He felt that he had no right to remain any longer, when in all probability his presence was a torture to the girl who had injured him.

'I will not prolong my visit, Marian,' he said regretfully. 'It was altogether a foolish one, perhaps; but I wanted so much to see you once more,

to hear some explanation of your conduct from your own lips.'

'My conduct can admit of neither explanation nor justification,' she replied humbly. 'I know how wickedly I have acted. Believe me, Gilbert, I am quite conscious of my unworthiness, and how little right I have to expect your forgiveness.'

'It is my weakness, rather than my merit, not to be able to cherish any angry feeling against you, Marian. Mine has been a slavish kind of love. I suppose that sort of thing never is successful. Women have an instinctive contempt for men who love them with such blind unreasonable idolatry.'

'I do not know how that may be; but I know that I have always respected and esteemed you,' she answered in her gentle pleading way.

'I am grateful to you even for so much as that. And now I suppose I must say good-bye —rather a hard word to say under the circumstances. Heaven knows when you and I may meet again.'

'Won't you stop and take some luncheon? I dine early when my husband is away; it saves

trouble to the people of the house. The bailiff's daughter always dines with me when I am alone; but I don't suppose you will mind sitting down with her. She is a good girl, and very fond of me.'

'I would sit down to dinner with a chimney-sweep, if he were a favourite of yours, Marian—or Mrs. Holbrook; I suppose I must call you that now.'

After this they talked of Captain Sedgewick for a little, and the tears came to Marian's eyes as she spoke of that generous and faithful protector. While they were talking thus, the door was opened, and a bright-faced countrified-looking girl appeared carrying a tray. She was dressed in a simple pretty fashion, a little above her station as a bailiff's daughter, and had altogether rather a superior look, in spite of her rusticity, Gilbert thought.

She was quite at her ease in his presence, laying the cloth briskly and cleverly, and chattering all the time.

'I am sure I'm very glad any visitor should come to see Mrs. Holbrook,' she said; 'for she has had a sad lonely time of it ever since she

has been here, poor dear. There are not many young married women would put-up with such a life.'

'Nelly,' Marian exclaimed reproachfully, 'you know that I have had nothing to put-up with—that I have been quite happy here.'

'Ah, it's all very well to say that, Mrs. Holbrook; but I know better. I know how many lonely days you've spent, so downhearted that you could scarcely speak or look up from your book, and that only an excuse for fretting.—If you're a friend of Mr. Holbrook's, you might tell him as much, sir; that he's killing his pretty young wife by inches, by leaving her so often alone in this dreary place. Goodness knows, it isn't that I want to get rid of her. I like her so much that I sha'n't know what to do with myself when she's gone. But I love her too well not to speak the truth when I see a chance of its getting to the right ears.'

'I am no friend of Mr. Holbrook's,' Gilbert answered; 'but I think you are a good generous-hearted girl.'

'You are a very foolish girl,' Marian exclaimed; 'and I am extremely angry with you for talking

such utter nonsense about me. I may have been a little out of spirits sometimes in my husband's absence; but that is all. I shall begin to think that you really do want to get rid of me, Nell, say what you will.'

'That's a pretty thing, when you know that I love you as dearly as if you were my sister; to say nothing of father, who makes a profit by your being here, and would be fine and angry with me for interfering. No, Mrs. Holbrook; it's your own happiness I'm thinking of, and nothing else. And I do say that it's a shame for a pretty young woman like you to be shut up in a lonely old farmhouse while your husband is away, enjoying himself goodness knows where; and when he is here, I can't see that he's very good company, considering that he spends the best part of his time—'

The girl stopped abruptly, warned by a look from Marian. Gilbert saw this look, and wondered what revelation of Mr. Holbrook's habits the bailiff's daughter had been upon the point of making; he was so eager to learn something of this man, and had been so completely baffled in all his endeavours hitherto.

'I will not have my affairs talked about in this foolish way, Ellen Carley,' Marian said resolutely.

And then they all three sat down to the dinner-table. The dishes were brought in by the woman who had admitted Gilbert. The dinner was excellent after a simple fashion, and very nicely served: but for Mr. Fenton the barn-door fowl and home-cured ham might as well have been the grass which the philosopher believed the French people might learn to eat. He was conscious of nothing but the one fact that he was in Marian's society for perhaps the last time in his life. He wondered at himself not a little for the weakness which made it so sweet to him to be with her.

The moment came at last in which he must needs take his leave, having no possible excuse for remaining any longer.

'Good-bye, Marian,' he said. 'I suppose we are never likely to meet again.'

'One never knows what may happen; but I think it is far better we should not meet, for many reasons.'

'What am I to tell your grandfather when I see him?'

'That I will come to him as soon as I can get my husband's permission to do so.'

'I should not think there would be any difficulty about that, when he knows that this relationship is likely to bring you fortune.'

'I daresay not.'

'And if you come to London to see Mr. Nowell, there will be some chance of our meeting again.'

'What good can come of that?'

'Not much to me, I daresay. It would be a desperate, melancholy kind of pleasure. Anything is better than the idea of losing sight of you for ever—of leaving this room to-day never to look upon your face again.'

He wrote Jacob Nowell's address upon one of his own cards, and gave it to Marian; and then prepared to take his departure. He had an idea that the bailiff's daughter would conduct him to the gate, and that he would be able to make some inquiries about Mr. Holbrook on his way. It is possible that Marian guessed his intentions in this respect; for she offered to go with him to the gate herself; and he could not with any decency refuse to be so honoured.

They went through the hall together, where all was as still and lifeless as it had been when he arrived, and walked slowly side by side along the broad garden-path in utter silence. At the gate Gilbert stopped suddenly, and gave Marian his hand.

'My darling,' he said, 'I forgive you with all my heart; and I will pray for your happiness.'

'Will you try to forgive my husband also?' she asked in her plaintive beseeching way.

'I do not know what I am capable of in that direction. I promise that, for your sake, I will not attempt to do him any injury.'

'God bless you for that promise! I have so dreaded the chance of a meeting between you two. It has often been the thought of that which has made me unhappy when that faithful girl, Nelly, has noticed my low spirits. You have removed a great weight from my mind.'

'And you will trust me better after that promise?'

'Yes; I will trust you as you deserve to be trusted, with all my heart.'

'And now, good-bye. It is a hard word for me to say; but I must not detain you here in the cold.'

He bent his head, and pressed his lips upon the slender little hand which held the key of the gate. In the next moment he was outside that tall iron barrier; and it seemed to him as if he were leaving Marian in a prison. The garden, with its poor pale scentless autumn flowers, had a dreary look under the dull gray sky. He thought of the big empty house, with its faded traces of vanished splendour, and of Marian's lonely life in it, with unspeakable pain. How different from the sunny home which he had dreamed of in the days gone by—the happy domestic life which he had fancied they two might lead!

'And she loves this man well enough to endure the dullest existence for his sake,' he said to himself, as he turned his back at last upon the tall iron gate, having lingered there for some minutes after Marian had reëntered the house. 'She could forget all our plans for the future at his bidding.'

He thought of this with a jealous pang, and with all his old anger against his unknown rival. Moved by an impulse of love and pity for Marian, he had promised that this man should suffer no

injury at his hands; and, having so pledged himself, he must needs keep his word. But there were certain savage feelings and primitive instincts in his breast not easily to be vanquished; and he felt that now he had bound himself to keep the peace in relation to Mr. Holbrook, it would be well that those two should not meet.

'But I will have some explanation from Sir David Forster as to that lie he told me,' he said to himself: 'and I will question John Saltram about this man Holbrook.'

John Saltram — John Holbrook. An idea flashed into his brain that seemed to set it on fire. What if John Saltram and John Holbrook were one!—what if the bosom friend whom he had introduced to his betrothed had played the traitor, and stolen her from him! In the next moment he put the supposition away from him, indignant with himself for being capable of thinking such a thing, even for an instant. Of all the men upon earth who could have done him this wrong, John Saltram was the last he could have believed guilty. Yet the thought recurred to him many times after this with a foolish tiresome persistence; and he found himself going over the

circumstances of his friend's acquaintance with Marian, his hasty departure from Lidford, his return there later during Sir David Forster's illness. Let him consider these facts as closely as he might, there was no especial element of suspicion in them. There might have been a hundred reasons for that hurried journey to London —nay, the very fact itself argued against the supposition that Mr. Saltram had fallen in love with his friend's plighted wife.

And now, the purpose of his life being so far achieved, Gilbert Fenton rode back to Winchester next day, restored his horse to its proprietor, and went on to London by an evening train.

CHAPTER II.

MISS CARLEY'S ADMIRERS.

THERE were times in which Marian Holbrook's life would have been utterly lonely but for the companionship of Ellen Carley. This warm-hearted, outspoken country girl had taken a fancy to Mr. Holbrook's beautiful wife from the hour of her arrival at the Grange, one cheerless March evening, and had attached herself to Marian from that moment with unalterable affection and fidelity. The girl's own life at the Grange had been lonely enough, except during the brief summer months, when the roomy old house was now and then enlivened a little by the advent of a lodger, —some stray angler in search of a secluded trout-stream, or an invalid who wanted quiet and fresh air. But in none of these strangers had Ellen ever taken much interest. They had come and gone, and made very little impression upon her

mind, though she had helped to make their sojourn pleasant, in her own brisk cheery way.

She was twenty-one years of age, very bright-looking, if not absolutely pretty, with dark expressive eyes, a rosy brunette complexion, and very white teeth. The nose belonged to the inferior order of pug or snub; the forehead was low and broad, with dark-brown hair rippling over it—hair which seemed always wanting to escape from its neat arrangement into a multitude of mutinous curls. She was altogether a young person whom the admirers of the soubrette style of beauty might have found very charming; and, secluded as her life at the Grange had been, she had already more than one admirer.

She used to relate her love-affairs to Marian Holbrook in the quiet summer evenings, as the two sat under an old cedar in the meadow nearest the house — a meadow which had been a lawn in the days when the Grange was in the occupation of great folks; and was divided from a broad terrace-walk at the back of the house by a dry grass-grown moat, with steep sloping banks, upon which there was a wealth of primroses and violets in the early spring. Ellen Carley told Mrs. Hol-

brook of her admirers, and received sage advice from that experienced young matron, who by and by confessed to her humble companion the error of her own girlhood, and how she had jilted the most devoted and generous lover that ever a woman could boast of.

For some months—for the bright honeymoon period of her wedded life—Marian had been completely happy in that out-of-the-world region. It is not to be supposed that she had done so great a wrong to Gilbert Fenton except under the influence of a great love, or the dominion of a nature powerful enough to subjugate her own. Both these influences had been at work. Too late she had discovered that she had never really loved Gilbert Fenton; that the calm grateful liking which she had told herself must needs be the sole version of the grand passion whereof her nature was capable, had been only the tamest, most ordinary kind of friendship after all, and that in the depths of her soul there was a capacity for an utterly different attachment — a love which was founded on neither respect nor gratitude, but which sprang into life in a moment, fatal and all-absorbing from its birth.

Heaven knows she had struggled bravely against this luckless passion, had resisted long and steadily the assiduous pursuit, the passionate half-despairing pleading, of her lover, who would not be driven away, and who invented all kinds of expedients for seeing her, however difficult the business might be, or however resolutely she might endeavour to avoid him. It was only after her uncle's death, when her mind was weakened by excessive grief, that her strong determination to remain faithful to her absent betrothed had at last given way before the force of those tender passionate prayers, and she had consented to the hasty secret marriage which her lover proposed. Her consent once given, not a moment had been lost. The business had been hurried on with the utmost eagerness by the impetuous lover, who would give her as little opportunity as possible of changing her mind, and who had obtained complete mastery of her will from the moment in which she promised to be his wife.

She loved him with all the unselfish devotion of which her nature was capable; and no thought of the years to come, or of what her future life might be with this man of whose character and

circumstances she knew so very little, ever troubled her. Having sacrificed her fidelity to Gilbert Fenton, she held all other sacrifices light as air—never considered them at all, in fact. When did a generous romantic girl of nineteen ever stop to calculate the chances of the future, or fear to encounter poverty and trouble with the man she loved? To Marian this man was henceforth all the world. It was not that he was handsomer, or better, or in any obvious way superior to Gilbert Fenton. It was only that he was just the one man able to win her heart. That mysterious attraction which reason can never reduce to rule, which knows no law of precedent or experience, reigned here in full force. It is just possible that the desperate circumstances of the attachment, the passionate pursuit of the lover, not to be checked by any obstacle, may have had an influence upon the girl's mind. There was a romance in such love as this that had not existed in Mr. Fenton's straightforward wooing; and Marian was too young to be quite proof against the subtle charm of a secret, romantic, despairing passion.

For some time she was very happy; and the remote farmhouse, with its old-fashioned gardens

and fair stretch of meadow-land beyond them, where all shade and beauty had not yet been sacrificed to the interests of agriculture, seemed to her in those halcyon days a kind of earthly paradise. She endured her husband's occasional absence from this rural home with perfect patience. These absences were rare and brief at first, but afterwards grew longer and more frequent. Nor did she ever sigh for any brighter or gayer life than this which they led together at the Grange. In him were the beginning and end of her hopes and dreams; and so long as he was pleased and contented, she was completely happy. It was only when a change came in him—very slight at first, but still obvious to the wife's tender watchful eyes —that her own happiness was clouded. That change told her that whatever he might be to her, she was no longer all the world to him. He loved her still, no doubt; but the bright holiday-time of his love was over, and his wife's presence had no longer the power to charm away every dreary thought. He was a man in whose disposition there was a lurking vein of melancholy—a kind of chronic discontent very common to men of whom it has been said that they might do great things

in the world, and who have succeeded in doing nothing.

It is not to be supposed that Mr. Holbrook intended to keep his wife shut away from the world in a lonely farmhouse all her life. The place suited him very well for the present; the apartments at the Grange, and the services of Mr. Carley and his dependents, had been put at his disposal by the owner of the estate, together with all farm and garden produce. Existence here therefore cost him very little; his chief expenses were in gifts to the bailiff and his underlings, which he bestowed with a liberal hand. His plans for the future were as yet altogether vague and unsettled. He had thoughts of emigration, of beginning life afresh in a new country—anything to escape from the perplexities that surrounded him here; and he had his reasons for keeping his wife secluded. Nor did his conscience disturb him much—he was a man who had his conscience in very good training—as to the unfairness of this proceeding. Marian was happy, he told himself; and when the time came for some change in the manner of her existence, he doubted if the change would be for the better.

So the days and weeks and months had passed away, bringing little variety with them, and none of what the world calls pleasure. Marian read and worked and rambled in the country lanes and meadows with Ellen Carley, and visited the poor people now and then, as she had been in the habit of doing at Lidford. She had not very much to give them, but gave all she could; and she had a gentle sympathetic manner, which made her welcome amongst them, most of all where there were children, for whom she had always a special attraction. The little ones clung to her and trusted her, looking up at her lovely face with spontaneous affection.

William Carley, the bailiff, was a big broad-shouldered man, with a heavy forbidding countenance, and a taciturn habit by no means calculated to secure him a large circle of friends. His daughter and only child was afraid of him; his wife had been afraid of him in her time, and had faded slowly out of a life that had been very joyless, unawares, hiding her illness from him to the last, as if it had been a sort of offence against him to be ill. It was only when she was dying that the bailiff knew he was going to lose her; and

must be confessed that he took the loss very calmly.

Whatever natural grief he may have felt was carefully locked in his own breast. His underlings, the farm-labourers, found him a little more 'grumpy' than usual, and his daughter scarcely dared open her lips to him for a month after the funeral. But from that time forward Miss Carley, who was rather a spirited damsel, took a very different tone with her father. She was not to be crushed and subdued into a mere submissive shadow, as her mother had been. She had a way of speaking her mind on all occasions which was by no means agreeable to the bailiff. If he drank too much overnight, she took care to tell him of it early next morning. If he went about slovenly and unshaven, her sharp tongue took notice of the fact. Yet with all this, she waited upon him, and provided for his comfort in a most dutiful manner. She saved his money by her dexterous management of the household, and was in all practical matters a very treasure among daughters. William Carley liked comfort, and liked money still better, and he was quite aware that his daughter was valuable to him, though he was careful

not to commit himself by any expression of that opinion.

He knew her value so well that he was jealously averse to the idea of her marrying and leaving him alone at the Grange. When young Frank Randall, the lawyer's son, took to calling at the old house very often upon summer evenings, and by various signs and tokens showed himself smitten with Ellen Carley, the bailiff treated the young man so rudely that he was fain to cease from coming altogether, and to content himself with an occasional chance meeting in the lane, when Ellen had business at Crosber, and walked there alone after tea. He would not have been a particularly good match for any one, being only an articled clerk to his father, whose business in the little market-town of Malsham was by no means extensive; and William Carley spoke of him scornfully as a pauper. He was a tall good-looking young fellow, however, with a candid pleasant face and an agreeable manner; so Ellen was not a little angry with her father for his rudeness, still more angry with him for his encouragement of her other admirer, a man called Stephen Whitelaw, who lived about a mile from the Grange, and

farmed his own land, an estate of some extent for that part of the country.

'If you must marry,' said the bailiff, 'and it's what girls like you seem to be always thinking about, you can't do better than take up with Steph Whitelaw. He's a warm man, Nell, and a wife of his will never want a meal of victuals or a good gown to her back. You'd better not waste your smiles and your civil words on a beggar like young Randall, who won't have a home to take you to for these ten years to come—not then, perhaps—for there's not much to be made by law in Malsham nowadays. And when his father dies—supposing he's accommodating enough to die in a reasonable time, which it's ten to one he won't be — the young man will have his mother and sisters to keep upon the business very likely, and there'd be a nice look-out for you. Now, if you marry my old friend Steph, he can make you a lady.'

This was a very long speech for Mr. Carley. It was grumbled out in short spasmodic sentences between the slow whiffs of his pipe, as he sat by the fire in a little parlour off the hall, with his indefatigable daughter at work at a table near him.

'Stephen Whitelaw had need be a gentleman himself before he could make me a lady,' Nelly answered, laughing. 'I don't think fine clothes can make gentlefolks; no, nor farming one's own land, either, though that sounds well enough. I am not in any hurry to leave you, father, and I'm not one of those girls who are always thinking of getting married; but come what may, depend upon it, I shall never marry Mr. Whitelaw.'

'Why not, pray?' the bailiff asked savagely.

Nelly shook out the shirt she had been repairing for her father, and then began to fold it, shaking her head resolutely at the same time.

'Because I detest him,' she said; 'a mean, close, discontented creature, who can see no pleasure in life except money-making. I hate the very sight of his pale pinched face, father, and the sound of his hard shrill voice. If I had to choose between the workhouse and marrying Stephen Whitelaw, I'd choose the workhouse; yes, and scrub, and wash, and drudge, and toil there all my days, rather than be mistress of Wyncomb Farm.'

'Well, upon my word,' exclaimed the father, taking the pipe from his mouth, and staring aghast at his daughter in a stupor of indignant

surprise, 'you're a pretty article; you're a nice piece of goods for a man to bring up and waste his substance upon — a piece of goods that will turn round upon one and refuse a man who farms his own land. Mind, he hasn't asked you yet, my lady; and never may, for aught I know.'

'I hope he never will, father,' Nelly answered quietly, unsubdued by this outburst of the bailiff's.

'If he does, and you don't snap at such a chance, you need never look for a sixpence from me; and you'd best make yourself scarce pretty soon into the bargain. I'll have no such trumpery about my house.'

'Very well, father; I daresay I can get my living somewhere else, without working much harder than I do here.'

This open opposition on the girl's part made William Carley only the more obstinately bent upon that marriage, which seemed to him such a brilliant alliance, which opened up to him the prospect of a comfortable home for his old age, where he might repose after his labours, and live upon the fat of the land without toil or care. He had a considerable contempt for the owner of

Wyncomb Farm, whom he thought a poor creature both as a man and a farmer; and he fancied that if his daughter married Stephen Whitelaw, he might become the actual master of that profitable estate. He could twist such a fellow as Stephen round his fingers, he told himself, when invested with the authority of a father-in-law.

Mr. Whitelaw was a pale-faced little man of about five-and-forty years of age; a man who had remained a bachelor to the surprise of his neighbours, who fancied, perhaps, that the owner of a good house and a comfortable income was in a manner bound by his obligation to society to take to himself a partner with whom to share these advantages. He had remained unmarried, giving no damsel ground for complaint by any delusive attentions, and was supposed to have saved a good deal of money, and to be about the richest man in those parts, with the exception of the landed gentry.

He was by no means an attractive person in this the prime of his manhood. He had a narrow mean-looking face, with sharp features, and a pale sickly complexion, which looked as if he had spent his life in some close London office rather than

in the free sweet air of his native fields. His hair was of a reddish tint, very sleek and straight, and always combed with extreme precision upon each side of his narrow forehead; and he had scanty whiskers of the same unpopular hue, which he was in the habit of smoothing with a meditative air upon his sallow cheeks with the knobby fingers of his bony hand. He was of a rather nervous temperament, inclined to silence, like his big burly friend, William Carley, and had a deprecating, doubtful way of expressing his opinion at all times. In spite of this humility of manner, however, he cherished a secret pride in his superior wealth, and was apt to remind his associates, upon occasion, that he could buy-up any one of them without feeling the investment.

After having attained the discreet age of forty-five without being a victim to the tender passion, Mr. Whitelaw might reasonably have supposed himself exempt from the weakness so common to mankind. But such self-gratulation, had he indulged in it, would have been premature; for after having been a visitor at the Grange, and boon-companion of the bailiff's for some ten years, it slowly dawned upon him that Ellen Carley was a

very pretty girl, and that he would have her for his wife, and no other. Her brisk off-hand manner had a kind of charm for his slow apathetic nature; her rosy brunette face, with its bright black eyes and flashing teeth, seemed to him the perfection of beauty. But he was not an impetuous lover. He took his time about the business, coming two or three times a week to smoke his pipe with William Carley, and paying Nelly some awkward blundering compliment now and then in his deliberate hesitating way. He had supreme confidence in his own position and his money, and was troubled by no doubt as to the ultimate success of his suit. It was true that Nelly treated him in by no means an encouraging manner—was, indeed, positively uncivil to him at times; but this he supposed to be mere feminine coquetry; and it enhanced the attractions of the girl he designed to make his wife. As to her refusing him when the time came for his proposal, he could not for a moment imagine such a thing possible. It was not in the nature of any woman to refuse to be mistress of Wyncomb, and to drive her own whitechapel cart —a comfortable hooded vehicle of the wagonette species, which was popular in those parts.

So Stephen Whitelaw took his time, contented to behold the object of his affection two or three evenings a week, and to gaze admiringly upon her beauty as he smoked his pipe in the snug little oak-wainscoted parlour at the Grange, while his passion grew day by day, until it did really become a very absorbing feeling, second only to his love of money and Wyncomb Farm. These dull sluggish natures are capable of deeper passions than the world gives them credit for; and are as slow to abandon an idea as they are to entertain it.

It was Ellen Carley's delight to tell Marian of her troubles, and to protest to this kind confidante again and again that no persuasion or threats of her father's should ever induce her to marry Stephen Whitelaw—which resolution Mrs. Holbrook fully approved. There was a little gate opening from a broad green lane into one of the fields at the back of the Grange; and here sometimes of a summer evening they used to find Frank Randall, who had ridden his father's white pony all the way from Malsham for the sake of smoking his evening cigar on that particular spot. They used to find him seated there, smoking lazily, while the pony cropped the grass in the lane close

at hand. He was always eager to do any little service for Mrs. Holbrook; to bring her books or anything else she wanted from Malsham—anything that might make an excuse for his coming again by appointment, and with the certainty of seeing Ellen Carley. It was only natural that Marian should be inclined to protect this simple love-affair, which offered her favourite a way of escape from the odious marriage that her father pressed upon her. The girl might have to endure poverty as Frank Randall's wife; but that seemed a small thing in the eyes of Marian, compared with the horror of marrying that pale-faced mean-looking little man, whom she had seen once or twice sitting by the fire in the oak-parlour, with his small light-gray eyes fixed in a dull stare upon the bailiff's daughter.

CHAPTER III.

JACOB NOWELL'S WILL.

At his usual hour, upon the evening after his arrival in London, Gilbert Fenton called at the silversmith's shop in Queen-Anne's-court. He found Jacob Nowell weaker than when he had seen him last, and with a strange old look, as if extreme age had come upon him suddenly. He had been compelled to call in a medical man, very much against his will; and this gentleman had told him that his condition was a critical one, and that it would be well for him to arrange his affairs quickly, and to hold himself prepared for the worst.

He seemed to be slightly agitated when Gilbert told him that his granddaughter had been found.

'Will she come to me, do you think?' he asked.

'I have no doubt that she will do so, directly she hears how ill you have been. She was very much pleased at the idea of seeing you, and only waited for her husband's permission to come. But I don't suppose she will wait for that when she knows of your illness. I shall write to her immediately.'

'Do,' Jacob Nowell said eagerly; 'I want to see her before I die. You did not meet the husband, then, I suppose?'

'No; Mr. Holbrook was not there.'

He told Jacob Nowell all that it was possible for him to tell about his interview with Marian; and the old man seemed warmly interested in the subject. Death was very near him; and the savings of the long dreary years during which his joyless life had been devoted to money-making must soon pass into other hands. He wanted to know something of the person who was to profit by his death; he wanted to be sure that when he was gone some creature of his own flesh and blood would remember him kindly; not for the sake of his money alone, but for something more than that.

'I shall make my will to-morrow,' he said,

before Gilbert left him. 'I don't mind owning to you that I have something considerable to bequeath; for I think I can trust you. And if I should die before my grandchild comes to me, you will see that she has her rights, won't you? You will take care that she is not cheated by her husband, or by any one else?'

'I shall hold it a sacred charge to protect her interests, so far as it is possible for me to do so.'

'That's well. I shall make you one of the executors to my will, if you've no objection.'

'No. The executorship will bring me into collision with Mr. Holbrook, no doubt; but I have resolved upon my line of conduct with regard to him; and I am prepared for whatever may happen. My chief desire now is to be a real friend to your granddaughter; for I believe she has need of friends.'

The will was drawn up next day by an attorney of by no means spotless reputation, who had often done business for Mr. Nowell in the past, and who may have known a good deal about the origin of some of the silver which found its way to the old silversmith's stores. He was a gentleman frequently employed in the defence of those

injured innocents who appear at the bar of the Old Bailey; and was not at all particular as to the merits of the cases he conducted. This gentleman embodied Mr. Nowell's desires with reference to the disposal of his worldly goods in a very simple and straightforward manner. All that Jacob Nowell had to leave was left to his granddaughter, Marian Holbrook, for her own separate use and maintenance, independent of any husband whatsoever.

This was clear enough. It was only when there came the question, which a lawyer puts with such deadly calmness, as to what was to be done with the money in the event of Marian Holbrook's dying intestate, that any perplexity arose.

'Of course, if she has children, you'd like the money to go to them,' said Mr. Medler the attorney; 'that's clear enough, and had better be set out in your will. But suppose she should have no children, you'd scarcely like all you leave to go to her husband, who is quite a stranger to you, and who may be a scoundrel for aught you know.'

'No; I certainly shouldn't much care about enriching this Holbrook.'

'Of course not; to say nothing of the danger there would be in giving him so strong an interest in his wife's death. Not but what I daresay he'll contrive to squander the greater part of the money during her lifetime. Is it all in hard cash?'

'No; there is some house-property at Islington, which pays a high interest: and there are other freeholds.'

'Then we might tie those up, giving Mrs. Holbrook only the income. It is essential to provide against possible villany or extravagance on the part of the husband. Women are so weak and helpless in these matters. And in the event of your granddaughter dying without children, wouldn't you rather let the estate go to your son?'

'To him!' exclaimed Jacob Nowell. 'I have sworn that I would not leave him sixpence.'

'That's a kind of oath which no man ever considers himself bound to keep,' said the lawyer in his most insinuating tone. 'Remember, it's only a remote contingency. The chances are that your granddaughter will have a family to inherit this property, and that she will survive her father. And then, if we give her power to make a will, of

course it's pretty certain that she'll leave everything to this husband of hers. But I don't think we ought to do that, Mr. Nowell. I think it would be a far wiser arrangement to give this young lady only a life interest in the real estate. That makes the husband a loser by her death, instead of a possible gainer to a large amount. And I consider that your son's name has a right to come in here.'

'I cannot acknowledge that he has any such right. His extravagance almost ruined me when he was a young man; and his ingratitude would have broken my heart, if I had been weak enough to suffer myself to be crushed by it.'

'Time works changes amongst the worst of us, Mr. Nowell. I daresay your son has improved his habits in all these years, and is heartily sorry for the errors of his youth.'

'Have you seen him, Medler?' the old man asked quickly.

'Seen your son lately? No; indeed, my dear sir, I had no notion that he was in England.'

The fact is, that Percival Nowell had called upon Mr. Medler more than once since his arrival in London; and had discussed with that gentle-

man the chances of his father's having made, or not made, a will, and the possibility of the old man's being so far reconciled to him as to make a will in his favour. Percival Nowell had gone farther than this, and had promised the attorney a handsome percentage upon anything that his father might be induced to leave him by Mr. Medler's influence.

The discussion lasted for a long time; Mr. Medler pushing on stage by stage, in the favour of his secret client, anxious to see whether Jacob Nowell might not be persuaded to allow his son's name to take the place of his granddaughter, whom he had never seen, and who was really no more than a stranger to him, the attorney took care to remind him. But on this point the old man was immovable. He would leave his money to Marian, and to no one else. He had no desire that his son should ever profit by the labours and deprivations of all those joyless years in which his fortune had been scraped together. It was only as the choice of the lesser evil that he would consent to Percival's inheriting the property from his daughter, rather than that it should fall into the hands of Mr. Holbrook. The lawyer had hard

work before he could bring his client to this point; but he did at last succeed in doing so, and Percival Nowell's name was written in the will.

'I don't suppose Nowell will thank me much for what I've done, though I've had difficulty enough in doing it,' Mr. Medler said to himself, as he walked slowly homewards after this prolonged conference in Queen-Anne's-court. 'For of course the chances are ten to one against his surviving his daughter. Still these young women sometimes go off the hooks in an unexpected way, and he *may* come into the reversion.'

There was only one satisfaction for the attorney, and that lay in the fact that this long laborious interview had been all in the way of business, and could be charged for accordingly: 'To attending at your own house with relation to drawing-up the rough draft of your will, and consultation of two hours and a half thereupon;' and so on. The will was to be executed next day; and Mr. Medler was to take his clerk with him to Queen-Anne's-court, to act as one of the witnesses. He had obtained one other triumph in the course of the discussion, which was the insertion of his own name as executor in place

of Gilbert Fenton, against whom he raised so many specious arguments as to shake the old man's faith in Marian's jilted lover.

Percival Nowell dropped-in upon his father that night, and smoked his cigar in the dingy little parlour, which was so crowded with divers kinds of merchandise as to be scarcely habitable. The old man's son came here almost every evening, and behaved altogether in a very dutiful way. Jacob Nowell seemed to tolerate rather than to invite his visits, and the adventurer tried in vain to get at the real feelings underlying that emotionless manner.

'I think I might work round the governor if I had time,' this dutiful son said to himself, as he reflected upon the aspect of affairs in Queen-Anne's-court; 'but I fancy the old chap has taken his ticket for the next world — booked through—per express train, and the chances are that he'll keep his word and not leave me sixpence. Rather hard lines that, after my taking the trouble to come over here and hunt him up.'

There was one fact that Mr. Nowell the younger seemed inclined to ignore in the course of these

reflections; and that was the fact that he had not left America until he had completely used-up that country as a field for commercial enterprise, and had indeed made his name so far notorious in connection with numerous shady transactions as to leave no course open to him except a speedy departure. Since his coming to England he had lived entirely on credit; and beyond the fine clothes he wore and the contents of his two portmanteaus, he possessed nothing in the world. It was quite true that he had done very well in New York; but his well-being had been secured at the cost of other people; and after having started some half-dozen speculations, and living extravagantly upon the funds of his victims, he was now as poor as he had been when he left Belgium for America, the commission-agent of a house in the iron trade. In this position he might have prospered in a moderate way, and might have profited by the expensive education which had given him nothing but showy agreeable manners, had he been capable of steadiness and industry. But of these virtues he was utterly deficient, possessing instead a genius for that kind of swindling which keeps just upon the safe

side of felony. He had lived pleasantly enough, for many years, by the exercise of this agreeable talent; so pleasantly indeed that he had troubled himself very little about his chances of inheriting his father's savings. It was only when he had exhausted all expedients for making money on 'the other side,' that he turned his thoughts in the direction of Queen-Anne's-court, and began to speculate upon the probability of Jacob Nowell's good graces being worth the trouble of cultivation. The prospectuses which he had shown his father were mere waste paper, the useless surplus stationery remaining from a scheme that had failed to enlist the sympathies of a Transatlantic public. But he fancied that his only chance with the old man lay in an assumption of prosperity; so he carried matters with a high hand throughout the business, and swaggered in the little dusky parlour behind the shop just as he had swaggered on New-York Broadway or at Delmonico's in the heyday of his commercial success.

He called at Mr. Medler's office the day after Jacob Nowell's will had been executed, having had no hint of the fact from his father. The solicitor told him what had been done, and how

the most strenuous efforts on his part had only resulted in the insertion of Percival's name after that of his daughter.

Whatever indignation Mr. Nowell may have felt at the fact that his daughter had been preferred before him, he contrived to keep hidden in his own mind. The lawyer was surprised at the quiet gravity with which he received the intelligence. He listened to Mr. Medler's statement of the case with the calmest air of deliberation, seemed indeed to be thinking so deeply that it was as if his thoughts had wandered away from the subject in hand to some theme which allowed of more profound speculation.

'And if she should die childless, I should get all the freehold property?' he said at last, waking-up suddenly from that state of abstraction, and turning his thoughtful face upon the lawyer.

'Yes; all the real estate would be yours.'

'Have you any notion what the property is worth?'

'Not an exact notion. Your father gave me a list of investments. Altogether, I should fancy, the income will be something handsome—between two and three thousand a year, perhaps. Strange,

isn't it, for a man with all that money to have lived such a life as your father's?'

'Strange indeed,' Percival Nowell cried with a sneer. 'And my daughter will step into two or three thousand a year,' he went on; 'very pleasant for her, and for her husband into the bargain. Of course I'm not going to say that I wouldn't rather have had the income myself. You'd scarcely swallow that, as a man of the world, you see, Medler. But the girl is my only child, and though circumstances have divided us for the greater part of our lives, blood is thicker than water; and in short, since there was no getting the governor to do the right thing, and leave this money to me, it's the next best thing that he should leave it to Marian.'

'To say nothing of the possibility of her dying without children, and your coming into the property, after all,' said Mr. Medler, wondering a little at Mr. Nowell's philosophical manner of looking at the question.

'Sir,' exclaimed Percival indignantly, 'do you imagine me capable of speculating upon the untimely death of my only child?'

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders doubtfully.

In the course of his varied experience he had found men and women capable of very queer things when their pecuniary interests were at stake; and he had not a most exalted opinion of Mr. Nowell's virtue, he knew too many secrets connected with his early career.

'Remember, if ever by any strange chance you should come into this property, you have me to thank for getting your name into the will, and for giving your daughter only a life-interest. She would have had every penny left to her without reserve, if I hadn't fought for your interests as hard as ever I fought for anything in the whole course of my professional career.'

'You're a good fellow, Medler; and if ever fortune should favour me, which hardly seems on the cards, I sha'n't forget what I promised you the other day. I daresay you did the best you could for me, though it doesn't amount to much when it's done.'

Long after Percival Nowell had left him, Mr. Medler sat idle at his desk meditating upon his interview with that gentleman.

'I can't half understand his coolness,' he said to himself; 'I expected him to be as savage as

a bear when he found that the old man had left him nothing. I thought I should hear nothing but execrations and blasphemies; for I think I know my gentleman pretty well of old, and that he's not a person to take a disappointment of this kind very sweetly. There must be something under that quiet manner of his. Perhaps he knows more about his daughter than he cares to let out; knows that she is sickly, and that he stands a good chance of surviving her.'

There was indeed a lurking desperation under Percival Nowell's airy manner, of which the people amongst whom he lived had no suspicion. Unless some sudden turn in the wheel of fortune should change the aspect of affairs for him very soon, ruin, most complete and utter, was inevitable. A man cannot go on very long without money; and in order to pay his hotel-bill, Mr. Nowell had been obliged to raise funds from an accommodating gentleman with whom he had done business in years gone by, and who was very familiar with his own and his father's autograph. The bill upon which this gentleman advanced the money in question bore the name of Jacob Nowell, and was drawn at three months. Percival had per-

suaded himself that before the three months were out, his father would be in his grave, and his executors would scarcely be in a position to dispute the genuineness of the signature. In the mean time the money thus obtained enabled him to float on. He paid his hotel-bill, and removed to lodgings in one of the narrow streets to the north-east of Tottenham-court-road; an obscure lodging enough, where he had a couple of comfortable rooms on the first-floor, and where his going-out and coming-in attracted little notice. Here, as at the hotel, he chose to assume the name of Norton instead of his legitimate cognomen.

CHAPTER IV.

GILBERT ASKS A QUESTION.

GILBERT FENTON called at John Saltram's chambers within a day or two of his return from Hampshire. He had a strange, almost feverish, eagerness to see his old friend again; a sense of having wronged him for that one brief moment of thought in which the possibility of his guilt had flashed across his mind; and with this feeling there was mingled a suspicion that John Saltram had not acted quite fairly to him; that he had kept back knowledge which must have come to him as an intimate ally of Sir David Forster.

He found Mr. Saltram at home in the familiar untidy room, with the old chaos of books and papers about him. He looked tired and ill, and rose to greet his visitor with a weary air, as if nothing in the world possessed much interest for him nowadays.

'Why, John, you are as pallid as a ghost!' Gilbert exclaimed, grasping the hand extended

to him, and thinking of that one moment in which he had fancied he was never to touch that hand again. 'You have been at the old work, I suppose—over-doing it, as usual!'

'No, I have been working very little for these last few days. The truth is, I have not been able to work. The divine afflatus wouldn't come down upon me. There are times when a man's brain seems to be made of melted butter. Mine has been like that for the last week or so.'

'I thought you were going back to your fishing village near Oxford.'

'No; I was not in spirits for that. I have dined two or three times in Cavendish-square, and have been made much of, and have contrived to forget my troubles for a few hours.'

'You talk of your troubles as if you were very heavily burdened; and yet, for the life of me, I cannot see what you have to complain of,' Gilbert said wonderingly.

'Of course not. That is always the case with one's friends—even the best of them. It's only the man who wears the shoe that knows why it pinches and galls him. But what have you been doing since I saw you last?'

'I have been in Hampshire.'

'Indeed!' said John Saltram, looking him full in the face. 'And what took you into that quarter of the world?'

'I thought you took more interest in my affairs than to have to ask that question. I went to look for Marian Holbrook,—and I found her.'

'Poor old fellow!' Mr. Saltram said gently. 'And was there any satisfaction for you in the meeting?'

'Yes, and no. There was a kind of mournful pleasure in seeing the dear face once more.'

'She must have been surprised to see you.'

'She was, no doubt, surprised—unpleasantly, perhaps; but she received me very kindly, and was perfectly frank upon every subject except her husband. She would tell me nothing about him—neither his position in the world, nor his profession, if he has one, as I suppose he has. She owned he was not rich, and that is about all she said of him. Poor girl, I do not think she is happy!'

'What ground have you for such an idea?'

'Her face, which told me a great deal more than her words. Her beauty is very much faded

since the summer evening when I first saw her in Lidford Church. She seems to lead a lonely life in the old farmhouse to which her husband brought her immediately after their marriage—a life which few women would care to lead. And now, John, I want to know how it is you have kept back the truth from me in this matter; that you have treated me with a reserve which I had no right to expect from a friend.'

'What have I kept from you?'

'Your knowledge of this man Holbrook.'

'What makes you suppose that I have any knowledge of him?'

'The fact that he is a friend of Sir David Forster's. The house in which I found Marian belongs to Sir David, and was lent by him to Mr. Holbrook.'

'I do not know every friend of Forster's. He is a man who picks up his acquaintance in the highways and byways, and drops them when he is tired of them.'

'Will you tell me, on your honour, that you know nothing of this Mr. Holbrook?'

'Certainly.'

Gilbert Fenton gave a weary sigh, and then

seated himself silently opposite Mr. Saltram. He could not afford to doubt this friend of his. The whole fabric of his life must have dropped to pieces if John Saltram had played him false. His single venture as a lover having ended in shipwreck, he seemed to have nothing left him but friendship; and that kind of hero-worship which had made his friend always appear to him something better than he really was, had grown stronger with him since Marian's desertion.

'O Jack,' he said presently, 'I could bear anything in this world better than the notion that you could betray me—that you could break faith with me for the sake of another man.'

'I am not likely to do that. There is no man upon this earth I care for very much except you. I am not a man prone to friendship. In fact, I am a selfish worthless fellow at the best, Gilbert, and hardly merit your serious consideration. It would be wiser of you to think of me as I really am, and to think very little of me.'

'You did not show yourself remarkably selfish when you nursed me through that fever, at the hazard of your own life.'

'Pshaw! that was nothing. I could not have

done less in the position in which we two were. Such sacrifices as those count for very little. It is when a man's own happiness is in the scale that the black spot shows itself. I tell you, Gilbert, I am not worth your friendship. It would be better for you to go your own way, and have nothing more to do with me.'

Mr. Saltram had said this kind of thing very often in the past, so that the words had no especial significance to Gilbert. He only thought that his friend was in one of those gloomy moods which were common to him at times.

'I could not do without your friendship, Jack,' he said. 'Remember how barren the world is to me now. I have nothing left but that.'

'A poor substitute for better things, Gilbert. I am never likely to be much good to you or to myself. By the way, have you seen anything lately of that old man you told me about—Miss Nowell's grandfather?'

'I saw him the other night. He is very ill—dying, I believe. I have written to Marian to tell her that if she does not come very quickly to see him, there is a chance of her not finding him alive.'

'And she will come, of course.'

'I suppose so. She talked of waiting for her husband's consent; but she will scarcely do that when she knows her grandfather's precarious state. I shall go to Queen-Anne's-court after I leave you, to ascertain if there has been any letter from her to announce her coming. She is a complete stranger in London, and may be embarrassed if she arrives at the station alone. But I should imagine her husband would meet her there, supposing him to be in town.'

Mr. Fenton stayed with his friend about an hour after this; but John Saltram was not in a communicative mood to-night, and the talk lagged wearily. It was almost a relief to Gilbert when they had bidden each other good-night, and he was out in the noisy streets once more, making his way towards Queen-Anne's-court.

CHAPTER V.

DRIFTING AWAY.

Gilbert Fenton found Jacob Nowell worse; so much worse, that he had been obliged to take to his bed, and was lying in a dull shabby room upstairs, faintly lighted by one tallow candle on the mantelpiece. Marian was there when Gilbert went in. She had arrived a couple of hours before, and had taken her place at once by the sick-bed. Her bonnet and shawl were thrown carelessly upon a dilapidated couch by the window. Gilbert fancied she looked like a ministering angel as she sat by the bed, her soft brown hair falling loosely round the lovely face, her countenance almost divine in its expression of tenderness and pity.

'You came to town alone, Marian?' he asked in a low voice.

The old man was in a doze at this moment, lying with his pinched withered face turned towards his granddaughter, his feeble hand in hers.

'Yes, I came alone. My husband had not come back, and I would not delay any longer after receiving your letter. I am very glad I came. My poor grandfather seemed so pleased to see me. He was wandering a little when I first came in, but brightened wonderfully afterwards, and quite understood who I was.'

The old man awoke presently. He was in a semi-delirious state, but seemed to know his granddaughter, and clung to her, calling her by name with senile fondness. His mind wandered back to the past, and he talked to his son as if he had been in the room, reproaching him for his extravagance, his college debts, which had been the ruin of his careful hard-working father. At another moment he fancied that his wife was still alive, and spoke to her, telling her that their grandchild had been christened after her, and that she was to love the girl. And then the delirium left him for a time, his mind grew clearer, and he talked quite rationally in his slow feeble way.

'Is that Mr. Fenton?' he asked; 'the room's so dark, I can't see very well. She has come to me, you see. She's a good girl. Her eyes are like my wife's. Yes, she's a good girl. It seems

a hard thing that I should have lived all these years without knowing her; lived alone, with no one about me but those that were on the watch for my money, and eager to cheat me at every turn. My life might have been happier if I'd had a grandchild to keep me company, and I might have left this place and lived like a gentleman for her sake. But that's all past and gone. You'll be rich when I'm dead, Marian; yes, what most people would count rich. You won't squander the money, will you, my dear, as your father would, if it were left to him?'

'No, grandfather. But tell me about my father. Is he still living?' the girl asked eagerly.

'Never mind him, child,' answered Jacob Nowell. 'He hasn't troubled himself about you, and you can't do better than keep clear of him. No good ever came of anything he did yet, and no good ever will come. Don't you have anything to do with him, Marian. He'll try to get all your money away from you, if you give him a chance—depend upon that.'

'He is living, then? O, my dear grandfather, do tell me something more about him. Remember that whatever his errors may have been, he

is my father — the only relation I have in the world except yourself.'

'His whole life has been one long error,' answered Jacob Nowell. 'I tell you, child, the less you know of him the better.'

He was not to be moved from this, and would say no more about his son, in spite of Marian's earnest pleading. The doctor came in presently, for the second time that evening, and forbade his patient's talking any more. He told Gilbert as he left the house, that the old man's life was now only a question of so many days or so many hours.

The old woman who did all the work of Jacob Nowell's establishment — a dilapidated-looking widow, whom nobody in that quarter ever remembered in any other condition than that of widowhood—had prepared a small bedroom at the back of the house for Marian; a room in which Percival had slept in his early boyhood, and where the daughter found faint traces of her father's life. Mr. Macready as Othello, in a spangled tunic, with vest of actual satin let into the picture, after the pre-Raphaelite or realistic tendency commonly found in such juvenile works of art, hung over

the narrow painted mantelpiece. The fond mother had had this masterpiece framed and glazed in the days when her son was still a little lad, unspoiled by University life and those splendid aspirations which afterwards made his home hateful to him. There were some tattered books upon a little shelf by the bed—school prizes, an old *Virgil*, a *Robinson Crusoe* shorn of its binding. The boy's name was written in them in a scrawling schoolboy hand; not once, but many times, after the fashion of juvenile bibliopoles, with primitive rhymes in Latin and English setting forth his proprietorship in the volumes. Caricatures were scribbled upon the fly-leaves and margins of the books, the date whereof looked very old to Marian, long before her own birth.

It was not till very late that she consented to leave the old man's side and go to the room which had been got ready for her, to lie down for an hour. She would not hear of any longer rest, though the humble widow was quite pathetic in her entreaties that the dear young lady would try to get a good night's sleep, and would leave the care of Mr. Nowell to her, who knew his ways, poor dear gentleman, and would watch over him

as carefully as if he'd been her own poor husband, who kept his bed for a twelvemonth before he died, and had to be waited on hand and foot. Marian told this woman that she did not want rest. She had come to town on purpose to be with her grandfather, and would stay with him as long as he needed her care.

She did, however, consent to go to her room for a little in the early November dawn, when Jacob Nowell had fallen into a profound sleep; but when she did lie down, sleep would not come to her. She could not help listening to every sound in the opposite room — the falling of a cinder, the stealthy footfall of the watcher moving cautiously about now and then; listening still more intently when all was silent, expecting every moment to hear herself summoned suddenly. The sick-room and the dark shadow of coming death brought back the thought of that bitter time when her uncle was lying unconscious and speechless in the pretty room at Lidford, with the wintry light shining coldly upon his stony face; while she sat by his pillow, watching him in hopeless silent agony, waiting for that dread change which they had told her was the only change that could

come to him on earth. The scene reacted itself in her mind to-night, with all the old anguish. She shut it out at last with a great effort, and began to think of what her grandfather had said to her.

She was to be rich. She who had been a dependent upon others all her life was to know the security and liberty that must needs go along with wealth. She was glad of this, much more for her husband's sake than her own. She knew that the cares which had clouded their life of late, which had made him seem to love her less than he had loved her at first, had their chief origin in want of money. What happiness it would be for her to lift this burden from his life, to give him peace and security for the years to come! Her thoughts wandered away into the bright region of day-dreams after this, and she fancied what their lives might be without that dull sordid trouble of pecuniary embarrassments. She fancied her husband, with all the fetters removed that had hampered his footsteps hitherto, winning a name and a place in the world. It is so natural for a romantic inexperienced girl to believe that the man she loves was born to achieve greatness;

and that if he misses distinction, it is from the perversity of his surroundings or from his own carelessness, never from the fact of his being only a very small creature after all.

It was broad daylight when Marian rose after an hour of sleeplessness and thought, and refreshed herself with the contents of the cracked water-jug upon the rickety little washstand. The old man was still asleep when she went back to his room; but his breathing was more troubled than it had been the night before, and the widow, who was experienced in sickness and death, told Marian that he would not last very long. The shopman, Luke Tulliver, had come upstairs to see his master, and was hovering over the bed with a ghoulish aspect. This young man looked very sharply at Marian as she came into the room, seemed indeed hardly able to take his eyes from her face, and there was not much favour in his look. He knew who she was, and had been told how kindly the old man had taken to her in those last moments of his life; and he hated her with all his heart and soul, having devoted all the force of his mind for the last ten years to the cultivation of his employer's good graces, hoping

that Mr. Nowell, having no one else to whom to leave his money, would end by leaving it all to him. And here was a granddaughter, sprung from goodness knows where, to cheat him out of all his chances. He had always suspected Gilbert Fenton of being a dangerous sort of person, and it was no doubt he who had brought about this introduction, to the annihilation of Mr. Tulliver's hopes. This young man took his place in a vacant chair by the fire, as if determined to stop; while Marian seated herself quietly by the sleeper's pillow, thinking only of that one occupant of the room, and supposing that Mr. Tulliver's presence was a mark of fidelity.

The old man woke with a start presently, and looked about him in a slow bewildered way for some moments.

'Who's that?' he asked presently, pointing to the figure by the hearth.

'It's only Mr. Tulliver, sir,' the widow answered. 'He's so anxious about you, poor young man.'

'I don't want him,' said Jacob Nowell impatiently. 'I don't want his anxiety; I want to be alone with my granddaughter.'

'Don't send me away, sir,' Mr. Tulliver pleaded in a piteous tone. 'I don't deserve to be sent away like a stranger, after serving you faithfully for the last ten years—'

'And being well paid for your services,' gasped the old man. 'I tell you I don't want you. Go downstairs and mind the shop.'

'It's not open yet, sir,' remonstrated Mr. Tulliver.

'Then it ought to be. I'll have no idling and shirking because I'm ill. Go down and take down the shutters directly. Let the business go on just as if I was there to watch it.'

'I'm going, sir,' whimpered the young man; 'but it does seem rather a poor return after having served you as I have, and loved you as if you'd been my own father.'

'Very much men love their fathers nowadays! I didn't ask you to love me, did I? or hire you for that, or pay you for it? Pshaw, man, I know you. You wanted my money like the rest of them, and I didn't mind your thinking there was a chance of your getting it. I've rather encouraged the notion at odd times. It made you a better servant, and kept you honest. But now

that I'm dying, I can afford to tell the truth. This young lady will have all my money, every sixpence of it, except five-and-twenty pounds to Mrs. Mitchin yonder. And now you can go. You'd have got something perhaps in a small way, if you'd been less of a sneak and a listener; but you've played your cards a trifle too well.'

The old man had raised himself up in his bed, and rallied considerably while he made this speech. He seemed to take a malicious pleasure in his shopman's disappointment. But when Luke Tulliver had slowly withdrawn from the room, with a last venomous look at Marian, Jacob Nowell sank back upon his pillow exhausted by his unwonted animation.

'You don't know what a deep schemer that young man has been, Marian,' he said, 'and how I have laughed in my sleeve at his manœuvres.'

The dull November day dragged itself slowly through, Marian never leaving her post by the sick-bed. Jacob Nowell spent those slow hours in fitful sleep and frequent intervals of wakefulness, in which he would talk to Marian, however she might urge him to remember the doctor's in-

junctions that he should be kept perfectly quiet. It seemed indeed to matter very little whether he obeyed the doctor or not, since the end was inevitable.

One of the curates of the parish came in the course of the day, and read and prayed beside the old man's bed, Jacob Nowell joining in the prayers in a half mechanical way. For many years of his life he had neglected all religious duties. It was years since he had been inside a church; perhaps he had not been once since the death of his wife, who had persuaded him to go with her sometimes to the evening service, when he had generally scandalised her by falling asleep during the delivery of the sermon. All that the curate told him now about the necessity that he should make his peace with his God, and prepare himself for a world to come, had a far-off sound to him. He thought more about the silver downstairs, and what it was likely to realise in the auction-room. Even in this supreme hour his conscience did not trouble him much about the doubtful modes by which some of the plate he had dealt in had reached his hands. If he had not bought the things, some other dealer

would have bought them. That is the easy-going way in which he would have argued the question, had he been called upon to argue it at all.

Mr. Fenton came in the evening to see the old man, and stood for a little time by the bedside watching him as he slept, and talking in a low voice to Marian. He asked her how long she was going to remain in Queen-Anne's-court, and found her ideas very vague upon that subject.

'If the end is so near as the doctor says, it would be cruel to leave my grandfather till all is over,' she said.

'I wonder that your husband has not come to you, if he is in London,' Gilbert remarked to her presently. He found himself very often wondering about her husband's proceedings, in no indulgent mood.

'He may not be in London,' she answered, seeming a little vexed by the observation. 'I am quite sure that he will do whatever is best.'

'But if he should not come to you, and if your grandfather should die while you are alone here, I trust you will send for me and let me give you any help you may require. You can

scarcely stay in this house after the poor old man's death.'

'I shall go back to Hampshire immediately; if I am not wanted here for anything—to make arrangements for the funeral. O, how hard it seems to speak of that while he is still living!'

'You need give yourself no trouble on that account. I will see to all that, if there is no more proper person to do so.'

'You are very good. I am anxious to go back to the Grange as quickly as possible.'

Gilbert left soon after this. He felt that his presence was of no use in the sick-room, and that he had no right to intrude upon Marian at such a time.

CHAPTER VI.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

Almost immediately after Gilbert's departure, another visitor appeared in the dimly-lighted shop, where Luke Tulliver was poring over a newspaper at one end of the counter under a solitary gas-burner.

The new-comer was Percival Nowell, who had not been to the house since his daughter's arrival.

'Well,' said this gentleman, in his usual off-hand manner, 'how's the governor?'

'Very ill; going fast, the doctor says.'

'Eh? As bad as that? Then there's been a change since I was here last.'

'Yes; Mr. Nowell was taken much worse yesterday morning. He had a kind of fit, I fancy, and couldn't get his speech for some time afterwards. But he got over that, and has talked well enough since then,' Mr. Tulliver concluded rue-

fully, remembering his master's candid remarks that morning.

'I'll step upstairs and have a look at the old gentleman,' said Percival.

'There's a young lady with him,' Mr. Tulliver remarked, in a somewhat mysterious tone.

'A young lady!' the other cried. 'What young lady?'

'His granddaughter.'

'Indeed!'

'Yes; she came up from the country yesterday evening, and she's been sitting with him ever since. He seems to have taken to her very much. You'd think she'd been about him all her life; and she's to have all his money, he says. I wonder what his only son will say to that,' added Mr. Tulliver, looking very curiously at Percival Nowell, 'supposing him to be alive? Rather hard upon him, isn't it?'

'Uncommonly,' the other answered coolly. He saw that the shopman suspected his identity, though he had carefully avoided all reference to the relationship between himself and the old man in Luke Tulliver's presence, and had begged his father to say nothing about him.

'I should like to see this young lady before I go up to Mr. Nowell's room,' he said presently. 'Will you step upstairs and ask her to come down to me?'

'I can go if you wish, but I don't suppose she'll leave the old gentleman.'

'Never mind what you suppose. Tell her that I wish to say a few words to her upon particular business.'

Luke Tulliver departed upon his errand, while Percival Nowell went into the parlour, and seated himself before the dull neglected fire in the lumbering old arm-chair in which his father had sat through the long lonely evenings for so many years. Mr. Nowell the younger was not disturbed by any sentimental reflections upon this subject, however; he was thinking of his father's will, and the wrong which was inflicted upon him thereby.

'To be cheated out of every sixpence by my own flesh and blood!' he muttered to himself. 'That seems too much for any man to bear.'

The door was opened by a gentle hand presently, and Marian came into the room. Percival Nowell rose from his seat hastily and stood facing

her, surprised by her beauty and an indefinable likeness which she bore to her mother—a likeness which brought his dead wife's face back to his mind with a sudden pang. He had loved her after his own fashion once upon a time, and had grown weary of her and neglected her after the death of that short-lived selfish passion; but something, some faint touch of the old feeling, stirred his heart as he looked at his daughter to-night. The emotion was as brief as the breath of a passing wind. In the next moment he was thinking of his father's money, and how this girl had emerged from obscurity to rob him of it.

'You wish to speak to me on business, I am told,' she said, in her clear low voice, wondering at the stranger's silence and deliberate scrutiny of her face.

'Yes, I have to speak to you on very serious business, Marian,' he answered gravely.

'You are an utter stranger to me, and yet call me by my Christian name.'

'I am not an utter stranger to you. Look at me, Mrs. Holbrook. Have you never seen my face before?'

'Never.'

'Are you quite sure of that? Look a little longer before you answer again.'

'Yes!' she cried suddenly, after a long pause. 'You are my father!'

There had come back upon her, in a rapid flash of memory, the picture of a room in Brussels —a room lighted dimly by two wax-candles on the chimney-piece, where there was a tall dark man who snatched her up in his arms and kissed her before he went out. She remembered caring very little for his kisses, and having a childish consciousness of the fact that it was he who made her mamma cry so often in the quiet lonely evenings, when the mother and child were together in that desolate continental lodging.

Yet at this moment she was scarcely disposed to think much about her father's ill-conduct. She considered only that he was her father, and that they had found each other after long years of separation. She stretched out her arms, and would have fallen upon his breast; but something in his manner repelled her, something downcast and nervous, which had a chilling effect upon her, and gave her time to remember how little cause she had to love him. He did not

seem aware of the affectionate impulse which had moved her towards him at first. He gave her his hand presently. It was deadly cold, and lay loosely in her own.

'I was asking my grandfather about you this morning,' she said, wondering at his strange manner, 'but he would not tell me where you were.'

'Indeed! I am surprised to find you felt so much interest in me; I'm aware that I don't deserve as much. Yet I could plead plenty of excuses for my life, if I cared to trouble you with them; but I don't. It would be a long story; and when it was told, you might not believe it. Most men are, more or less, the slave of circumstances. I have suffered that kind of bondage all my life. I have known, too, that you were in good hands — better off in every way than you could have been in my care — or I should have acted differently in relation to you.'

'There is no occasion to speak of the past,' Marian replied gravely. 'Providence was very good to me; but I know my poor mother's last days were full of sorrow. I cannot tell how far it might have been in your power to prevent that.

It is not my place to blame, or even to question, your conduct.'

'You are an uncommonly dutiful daughter,' Mr. Nowell exclaimed with rather a bitter laugh; 'I thought that you would have repudiated me altogether perhaps; would have taken your tone from my father, who has grown pig-headed with old age, and cannot forgive me for having had the aspirations of a gentleman.'

'It is a pity there should not be union between my grandfather and you at such a moment as this,' Marian said.

'O, we are civil enough to each other. I bear no malice against the old man, though many sons in my position might consider themselves hardly used. And now I may as well go upstairs and pay my respects. Why is not your husband with you, by the bye?'

'He is not wanted here; and I do not even know that he is in London.'

'Humph! He seems rather a mysterious sort of person, this husband of yours.'

Marian took no notice of this remark, and the father and daughter went upstairs to the sick-room together. The old silversmith received his

son with obvious coolness, and was evidently displeased at seeing Marian and her father together.

Percival Nowell, however, on his part, appeared to be in an unusually affectionate and dutiful mood this evening. He held his place by the bedside resolutely, and insisted on sharing Marian's watch that night. So all through the long night those two sat together; while the old man passed from uneasy slumber to more uneasy wakefulness, and back to troubled sleep again, his breathing growing heavier and more laboured with every hour. They were very quiet, and could have found but little to say to each other, had there been no reason for their silence. That first brief impulsive feeling of affection past, Marian could only think of this newly-found father as the man who had made her mother's life lonely and wretched while he pursued his own selfish pleasures; and who had allowed her to grow to womanhood without having been the object of one thought or care upon his part. She could not forget these things, as she sat opposite to him in the awful silence of the sick-room, stealing a glance at his face now and then, and wondering

at the strange turn of fortune which had brought them thus together.

It was not a pleasant face by any means—not a countenance to inspire love or confidence. Handsome still, but with a faded look, like a face that had grown pallid and wrinkled in the feverish atmosphere of vicious haunts—under the flaring gas that glares down upon the green cloth of a rouge-et-noir table, in the tumult of crowded race-courses, the press and confusion of the betting-ring—it was the face of a battered *roué*, who had lived his life, and outlived the smiles of fortune; the face of a man to whom honest thoughts and hopes had long been unknown. There was a disappointed peevish look about the drooping corners of the mouth, an angry glitter in the eyes.

He did not look at his daughter very often as they sat together through that weary vigil, but kept his eyes for the greater part of the time upon the wasted face on the pillow, which looked like a parchment mask in the dim light. He seemed to be deep in thought, and several times in the night Marian heard him breathe an impatient sigh, as if his thoughts were not pleasant to him. More than once he rose from his chair

and paced the room softly for a little time, as if the restlessness of his mind had made that forced quiet unendurable. The early morning light came at last, faint and wan and gray, across a forest of blackened chimney-pots, and by that light the watchers could see that Jacob Nowell had changed for the worse.

He lingered till late that afternoon. It was growing dusk when he died, making a very peaceful end of life at the last, with his head resting upon Marian's shoulder, and his cold hand clasped in hers. His son stood by the bed, looking down upon him at that final moment with a fixed inscrutable face. Gilbert Fenton called that evening, and heard of the old man's death from Luke Tulliver. He heard also that Mrs. Holbrook intended to sleep in Queen-Anne's-court that night, and did not therefore intrude upon her, relying upon being able to see her next morning. He left his card, with a few words of condolence written upon it in pencil.

Mr. Nowell was with his daughter in the little parlour behind the shop when Luke Tulliver gave her this card. He asked who the visitor was.

'Mr. Fenton, a gentleman I knew at Lidford

in my dear uncle's lifetime. My grandfather liked him very much.'

'Mr. Fenton! Yes, my father told me all about him. You were engaged to him, and jilted him for this man you have married—very foolishly, as it seems to me; for he could certainly have given you a better position than that which you appear to occupy now.'

'I chose for my own happiness,' Marian answered quietly, 'and I have only one subject for regret; that is, that I was compelled to act with ingratitude towards a good man. But Mr. Fenton has forgiven me; has promised to be my friend, if ever I should have need of his friendship. He has very kindly offered to take all trouble off my hands with respect to—to the arrangements for the funeral.'

'He is remarkably obliging,' said Percival Nowell with a sneer; 'but as the only son of the deceased, I consider myself the proper person to perform that final duty.'

'I do not wish to interfere with your doing so. Of course I did not know how near at hand you were when Mr. Fenton made that offer, or I should have told him.'

'You mean to remain until the funeral is over, I suppose?'

'I think not; I want to go back to Hampshire as soon as possible—by an early train to-morrow morning, if I can. I do not see that there is any reason for my remaining. I could not prove my respect or affection for my grandfather any more by staying.'

'Certainly not,' her father answered promptly. 'I think you will be quite right in getting away from this dingy hole as quick as you can.'

'It is not for that. But I have promised to return directly I was free to do so.'

'And you go back to Hampshire? To what part of Hampshire?'

Marian told him the name of the place where she was living. He wrote the address in his pocket-book, and was especially careful that it should be correctly written, as to the name of the nearest town, and in all other particulars.

'I may have to write to you, or to come to you, perhaps,' he said. 'It's as well to be prepared for the contingency.'

After this Mr. Nowell sent out for a *Railway Guide*, in order to give his daughter all necessary

information about the trains for Malsham. There was a tolerably fast train that left Waterloo at seven in the morning, and Marian decided upon going by that. She had to spend the evening alone with her father, while Mrs. Mitchin kept watch in the dismal chamber upstairs. Mr. Nowell asked his daughter's permission to light his cigar, and having obtained it, sat smoking moodily all the evening, staring into the fire, and very rarely addressing his companion, who had taken a Bible out of her travelling-bag, and was reading those solemn chapters which best harmonised with her feelings at this moment; thinking as she read of the time when her guardian and benefactor lay in his last calm rest, and she had vainly tried to find comfort in the same words, and had found herself staring blankly at the sacred page, with eyes that were dry and burning, and to which there came no merciful relief from tears.

Her father glanced at her askance now and then from his arm-chair by the fire, as she sat by the little round table looking down at her book, the light of the candles shining full upon her pensive face. He looked at her with no friendliness in his eyes, but with that angry sparkle

which had grown almost habitual to them of late, since the world had gone ill with him. After one of those brief stolen looks, a strange smile crept over his face. He was thinking of a little speech of Shakespeare's Richard about his nephew, the youthful Prince of Wales:

'So young, so wise, they say do ne'er live long.'

'How pious she is!' he said to himself with a diabolical sneer. 'Did the half-pay Captain teach her that, I wonder? or does church-going, and psalm-singing, and Bible-reading come natural to all women? I know my mother was good at it, and my wife too. She used to fly to her Bible as a man flies to dram-drinking, or his pipe, when things go wrong.'

He got tired of his cigar at last, and went out into the shop, where he began to question Mr. Tulliver as to the extent and value of the stock-in-trade, and upon other details of the business; to all of which inquiries the shopman replied in a suspicious and grudging spirit, giving his questioner the smallest possible amount of information.

'You're an uncommonly cautious young man,

Mr. Nowell exclaimed at last. 'You'll never stand in your own light by being too anxious to oblige other people. I daresay, though, you could speak fast enough, if it was made worth your while.'

'I don't see what is to make it worth my while,' Luke Tulliver answered coolly. 'My duty is to my dead master, and those that are to come after him. I don't want strangers coming sniffing and prying into the stock. Mr. Nowell's books were kept so that I couldn't cheat him out of a sixpence, or the value of a sixpence; and I mean to hand 'em over to the lawyer in a manner that will do me credit. My master has not been a generous master to me, considering how I've served him, and I've got nothing but my character to look to; but that I have got, and I don't want it tampered with.'

'Who is going to tamper with it?' said Mr. Nowell. 'So you'll hand over the stock-books to the lawyer, will you, without a leaf missing, or an erasure, or an item marked off as sold that never was sold, or any little dodges of that kind, eh, Mr. Tulliver?'

'Of course,' answered the shopman, looking defiantly at the questioner, who was leaning across

the counter with folded arms, staring at Luke Tulliver with an ironical grin upon his countenance.

'Then you are a very remarkable man. I should have thought such a chance as a death as unexpected as my—as old Mr. Nowell's, would have made the fortune of a confidential clerk like you.'

'I'm not a thief,' answered Mr. Tulliver with an air of virtuous indignation; 'and you can't know much about old Jacob Nowell, if you think that anybody could cheat him, living or dead. There's not an entry in the book that isn't signed with his initials, in his own hand. When a thing was sold and crossed off the book, he put his initials to the entry of the sale. He went through the books every night till a week ago, and he'd as soon have cut his own head off as omit to do it, so long as he could see the figures in the book or hold his pen.'

Mr. Medler the lawyer came in while Percival Nowell and the shopman were talking. He had been away from his office upon business that evening, and had only just received the tidings of the silversmith's death.

Luke Tulliver handed him the books and keys of the cases in which the tarnished plate was exhibited. He went into all the details of the business carefully, setting his seal upon books and papers, and doing all that he could to make matters secure without hindrance to the carrying on of the trade.

He was surprised to hear that Mrs. Holbrook was in the house, and proposed paying his respects to her that evening; but this Mr. Nowell prevented. She was tired and out of spirits, he told the attorney; it would be better for him to see her next day. It was convenient to Mr. Nowell to forget Marian's intention of returning to Hampshire by an early train on the following morning at this juncture.

When he went back to the parlour by and by, after Mr. Medler had finished his business in the shop, and was trudging briskly towards his own residence, Mr. Nowell told his daughter that the lawyer had been there, but did not inform her of his desire to see her.

'I suppose you know all about your grandfather's will?' he said by and by, when he had half-finished another cigar. Marian had put away

her book by this time, and was looking dreamily at the fire, thinking of her husband, who need never know those weary sordid cares about money again, now that she was to be rich.

Her father's question startled her out of that agreeable day-dream.

'Yes,' she said: 'my grandfather told me that he had left all his money to me. I know that must seem unjust to you, papa; but I hope my husband will allow me to do something towards repairing that injustice in some measure.'

'In some measure!' Mr. Nowell thought savagely. 'That means a pittance that would serve to keep life in a pauper, I suppose; and that is to be contingent upon her husband's permission.' He made no audible reply to his daughter's speech, and seemed, indeed, so much absorbed in his own thoughts, that Marian doubted if he had heard her; and so the rest of the long evening wore itself out in dismal silence, while stealthy footsteps sounded now and then upon the stairs. Later Mr. Nowell was summoned to a conference with some mysterious person in the shop, whom Marian supposed to be

the undertaker; and returning from this interview with a gloomy face, he resumed his seat by the fire.

It seemed very strange to Marian that they two, father and daughter, should be together thus, so near and yet so wide apart; united by the closest tie of kindred, brought together thus after years of severance, yet with no bond of sympathy between them; no evidence of remorseful tenderness on the side of him whose life had been one long neglect of a father's duty.

'How could I expect that he would care for me in the smallest degree, after his desertion of my mother?' Marian thought to herself, as she meditated upon her father's coldness, which at first had seemed so strange to her. She had fancied that, whatever his sins in the past had been, his heart would have melted at the sight of his only child. She had thought of him and dreamed of him so often in her girlhood, elevating him in her romantic fancy into something much better and brighter than he really was—a sinner at best, it is true, but a sinner of a lofty type, a noble nature gone astray. She had imagined a reunion with him in the days to come, when it

should be her delight to minister to his declining years — to be the consolation of his repentant soul. And now she had found him she knew these things could never be—that there was not one feeling of sympathy possible between her and that broken-down, dissipated-looking man of the world.

The dismal evening came to an end at last, and Marian bade her father good-night, and went upstairs to the little room where the traces of his boyhood had interested her so keenly when first she looked upon them. Mr. Nowell promised to come to Queen-Anne's-court at a quarter past six next morning, to escort his daughter to the station, an act of parental solicitude she had not expected from him. He took his departure immediately afterwards, being let out of the shop-door by Luke Tulliver, who was in a very cantankerous humour, and took no pains to disguise the state of his feelings. The lawyer Mr. Medler had pried into everything, the shopman told Percival Nowell; had declared himself empowered to do this, as the legal adviser of the deceased; and had seemed as suspicious as if he, Luke Tulliver, meant to rob his dead master. Mr. Tulliver's

sensitive nature had been outraged by such a line of conduct.

'And what has he done with the books?' Mr. Nowell asked.

'They're all in the desk yonder, and that fellow Medler has taken away the keys.'

'Sharp practice,' said Mr. Nowell; 'but to a man with your purity of intention it can't matter what precautions are taken to insure the safety of the property.'

'Of course it don't matter,' the other answered peevishly; 'but I like to be treated as a gentleman.'

'Humph! And you expect to retain your place here, I suppose, if the business is carried on?'

'It's too good a business to be let drop,' replied Mr. Tulliver; 'but I shouldn't think that young lady upstairs would be much of a hand at trade. I wouldn't mind offering a fair price for the business,—I've got a tidy little bit of money put away, though my salary has been small enough, goodness knows; but I've lived with the old gentleman, and never wasted a penny upon pleasure; none of your music-halls, or dancing-

saloons, or anything of that kind, for me,—or I wouldn't mind paying an annual sum out of the profits of the trade for a reasonable term. If you've any influence with the young lady, perhaps you could put it to her, and get her to look at things in that light,' Mr. Tulliver added, becoming quite obsequious as it dawned upon him that this interloping stranger might be able to do him a service.

'I'll do my best for you, Tulliver,' Mr. Nowell replied, in a patronising tone. 'I daresay the young lady will be quite willing to entertain any reasonable proposition you may make.'

Faithful to his promise Mr. Nowell appeared at a quarter past six next morning, at which hour he found his daughter quite ready for her journey. She was very glad to get away from that dreary house, made a hundredfold more dismal by the sense of what lay in the closed chamber, where the candles were still burning in the yellow fog of the November morning, and to which Marian had gone with hushed footsteps to kneel for the last time beside the old man who was so near her by the ties of relationship, and whom she had known for so brief a space. She was glad

to leave that dingy quarter of the town, which to one who had never lived in an English city seemed unspeakably close and wretched; still more glad to think that she was going back to the quiet home, where her husband would most likely join her very soon. She might find him there when she arrived, perhaps; for he knew nothing of this journey to London, or could only hear of it at the Grange, where she had left a letter for him, enclosing that brief note of Gilbert Fenton's which had informed her of her grandfather's fatal illness. There were special reasons why she should not ask him to meet her in Queen-Anne's-court, however long she might have been compelled to stay there.

Mr. Nowell was much more affectionate in his manner to his daughter this morning, as they sat in the cab driving to the station, and walked side by side upon the platform in the quarter of an hour's interval before the departure of the train. He questioned her closely upon her life in the present, and her plans for the future, expressing himself in a remarkably generous manner upon the subject of her grandfather's will, and declaring himself very well pleased that his own

involuntary neglect was to be so amply atoned for by the old man's liberality. He found his daughter completely ignorant of the world, as gentle and confiding as he had found her mother in the past. He sounded the depths of her innocent mind during that brief promenade; and when the train bore her away at last, and the platform was clear, he remained for some time walking up and down in profound meditation, scarcely knowing where he was. He looked round him in an absent way by and by, and then hurriedly left the station, and drove straight to Mr. Medler's office, which was upon the ground-floor of a gloomy old house in one of the dingier streets in the Soho district, and in the upper chambers whereof the attorney's wife and numerous offspring had their abode. He came down to his client from his unpretending breakfast-table in a faded dressing-gown, with smears of egg and greasy traces of buttered toast about the region of his mouth, and seemed not particularly pleased to see Mr. Nowell. But the conference that followed was a long one; and it is to be presumed that it involved some chance of future profit, since the lawyer forgot to return

to his unfinished breakfast, much to the vexation of Mrs. Medler, a faded lady with everything about her in the extremest stage of limpness, who washed the breakfast-things with her own fair hands, in consideration of the multitudinous duties to be performed by that hapless solitary damsel who in such modest households is usually denominated 'the girl.'

CHAPTER VII.

AT LIDFORD AGAIN.

Gilbert Fenton called in Queen-Anne's-court within a few hours of Marian's departure, and was not a little disappointed when he was told that she had gone back to Hampshire. He had relied upon seeing her again—not once only, but several times—before her return. He had promised Jacob Nowell that he would watch over and protect her interests; and it was a sincere unqualified wish to do this that influenced him now. More than a dear friend, the sweetest and dearest of all womankind, she could never be to him. He accepted the position with resignation. The first sharp bitterness of her loss was over. That he should ever cease to love her was impossible; but it seemed to him that a chivalrous friendship for her, a disinterested brotherly affection, was in no manner incompatible with that

hapless silent love. No word of his, in all their intercourse to come, should ever remind her of that hidden devotion; no shadow of the past should ever cloud the calm brightness of the present. It was a romantic fancy, perhaps, for a man of business, whose days were spent in the very press and tumult of commercial life; but it had lifted Gilbert Fenton out of that slough of despond into which he had fallen when Marian seemed utterly lost to him—vanished altogether out of his existence.

He had a sense of bitter disappointment, therefore, when he found that she had gone, leaving neither letter nor message for him. How little value his friendship must needs possess for her, when she could abandon him thus without a word! He had felt sure that she would consult him upon her affairs; but no, she had her husband to whom to appeal, and had no need of any other counsellor.

'I was a fool to think that I could ever be anything to her, even a friend,' he said to himself bitterly; 'women are incapable of friendship. It is all or nothing with them; a blind self-abnegation or the coldest indifference. Devotion can-

not touch them, unless the man who gives it happen to be that one man out of a thousand who has the power to bewitch their senses. Truth and affection, of themselves, have no value with them. How many people spoke to me of this Holbrook as an unattractive man; and yet he won my love away from me, and holds her with an influence so complete, that my friendship seems worthless to her. She cannot give me a word or a thought.'

Mr. Fenton made some inquiries about the funeral arrangements, and found that these had been duly attended to by the lawyer and a gentleman who had been with Jacob Nowell a good deal of late, who seemed to be some relation to the old man, Mr. Tulliver said, and took a great deal upon himself. This being done, there was, of course, no occasion for Gilbert to interfere, and he was glad to be released from all responsibility. Having ascertained this, he asked for the address of the late Mr. Nowell's lawyer; and being told it, went at once to Mr. Medler's office. He did not consider himself absolved from the promise he had made the old man by Marian's indifference, and was none the less anxious to watch

over her interests because she seemed to set so little value on his friendship.

He told Mr. Medler who he was, and the promise he had given to Jacob Nowell, abstaining, of course, from any reference to the position he had once occupied towards Marian. He described himself as her friend only—a friend of long standing, who had been intimate with her adopted guardian.

'I know how ignorant Mrs. Holbrook is of the world and of all business matters,' he went on to say, 'and I am naturally anxious that her interests should be protected.'

'I should think there was very little doubt that her husband will see after those,' the lawyer answered, with something of a sneer; 'husbands are generally supposed to do that, especially where there is money at stake.'

'I do not know Mr. Holbrook; and he has kept himself in the background so persistently up to this point, and has been altogether so underhanded in his proceedings, that I have by no means a good opinion of him. Mr. Nowell told me that he intended to leave his money to his granddaughter in such a manner, that it would

be hers and hers only—free from the control of any husband. He has done so, I presume?'

'Yes,' Mr. Medler replied, with the air of a man who would fain have withheld the information; 'he has left it for her own separate use and maintenance.'

'And it is a property of some importance, I conclude?'

'Of some importance—yes,' the lawyer answered, in the same tone.

'Ought not Mrs. Holbrook to have remained to hear the reading of the will?'

'Well, yes, decidedly; it would have been more in the usual way of things; but her absence can have no ill effect upon her interests. Of course it will be my duty to make her acquainted with the contents of the will.'

Gilbert Fenton was not prepossessed by Mr. Medler's countenance, which was not an open candid index to a spotless soul, nor by his surroundings, which were of the shabbiest; but the business being in this man's hands, it might be rather difficult to withdraw it—dangerous even. The man held the will, and in holding that had a certain amount of power.

'There is no one except Mrs. Holbrook interested in Mr. Nowell's will, I suppose?' Gilbert said presently.

'No one directly and immediately, except an old charwoman, who has a legacy of five-and-twenty pounds.'

'But there is some one else interested in an indirect manner, I infer from your words?'

'Yes. Mrs. Holbrook takes the whole of the personalty, but she has only a life-interest in the real estate. If she should have children, it will go to them on her death; if she should die childless, it will go to her father, supposing him to survive her.'

'To her father? That is rather strange, isn't it?'

'I don't know that. It was the old man's wish that the will should be to that effect.'

'I understood from him that he did not know whether his son was alive or dead.'

'Indeed! I believe he had news of his son very lately.'

'Curious that he should not have told me, knowing as he did my interest in everything relating to Mrs. Holbrook.'

'Old people are apt to be close: and Jacob Nowell was about one of the closest customers I ever met with,' answered the lawyer.

Gilbert left him soon after this, and chartered a hansom in the next street, which carried him back to the City. He was very uncertain as to what he ought to do for Marian, doubtful of Mr. Medler's integrity, and yet anxious to abstain from any act that might seem uncalled for or officious. She had her husband to look after her interests, as the lawyer had reminded him, and it was scarcely probable that Mr. Holbrook would neglect any steps necessary to secure his wife's succession to whatever property Jacob Nowell had left. It seemed to Gilbert that he could do nothing at present, except write to Marian, telling her of his interview with the lawyer, and advising her to lose no time in placing the conduct of her affairs in more respectable hands than those of Mr. Medler. He mentioned his own solicitors, a City firm of high standing, as gentlemen whom she might wisely trust at this crisis of her life.

This done, he could only wait the issue of events, and he tried to occupy himself as much as possible with his business at St. Helens—that

business which he seriously intended getting rid of as soon as he could meet with a favourable opportunity for so doing. He worked with that object in view. In spite of his losses in Australia, he was in a position to retire from commerce with a very fair income. He had lost all motive for sustained exertion, all desire to become rich. A man who has no taste for expensive bachelor pleasures and no home has very little opportunity for getting rid of large sums of money. Mr. Fenton had taken life pleasantly enough, and yet had never spent five hundred a year. He could retire with an income of eight hundred; and having abandoned all idea of ever marrying, this seemed to him more than sufficient.

The Listers had come back to England, and Mrs. Lister had written to her brother more than once, begging him to run down to Lidford. Of course she had expressed herself freely upon the subject of Marian's conduct in these letters, reprobating the girl's treachery and ingratitude, and congratulating Gilbert upon his escape from so ineligible a connection. Mr. Fenton had put his sister off with excuses hitherto, and had subjected himself thereby to sundry feminine re-

proaches upon his coldness and want of affection for Mrs. Lister and her children. 'It was very different when Marian Nowell was here,' she wrote; 'you thought it no trouble to come to us then.'

No answer came to his letter to Mrs. Holbrook—which scarcely called for a reply, unless it had been a few lines of thanks, in acknowledgment of his interest in her behalf. He had looked for such a letter, and was a little disappointed by its non-appearance. The omission, slight as it was, served to strengthen his bitter feeling that his friendship in this quarter was unneeded and unvalued.

Business in the City happened to be rather slack at this time; and it struck Mr. Fenton all at once that he could scarcely have a better opportunity for wasting two or three days in a visit of duty to the Listers, and putting an end to his sister's reproachful letters. He had a second motive for going to Lidford; a motive which had far greater weight with him than his brotherly affection just at this time. He wanted to see Sir David Forster, to call that gentleman to some account for the deliberate falsehood he had uttered at their last meeting. He had no bloodthirsty

or ferocious feelings upon the subject, he could even understand that the Baronet might have been bound by his own ideas of honour to tell a lie in the service of his friend; but he wanted to extort some explanation of the line of conduct Sir David had taken, and he wanted to ascertain from him the character of Marian's husband. He had made inquiries about Sir David at the club, and had been told that he was still at Heatherly.

He went down to Lidford by an afternoon train, without having troubled himself to give Mrs. Lister any notice of his coming. The November evening had closed in upon the quiet rural landscape when he drove from the station to Lidford. A cold white mist enfolded all things here, instead of the stifling yellow fog that had filled the London streets when he walked westwards from the City at the same hour on the previous evening. Above his head the sky was clear and bright, the mist-wreaths melting away as they mounted towards the stars. The lighted windows in the village street had a pleasant homely look; the snug villas, lying back from the high road with a middle distance of dark lawn and glistening shrubbery, shone brightly upon the traveller

as he drove by, the curtains not yet drawn before some of the windows, the rooms ruddy in the firelight. In one of them he caught a brief glimpse of a young matron seated by the fire with her children clustered at her knee, and the transient picture struck him with a sudden pang. He had dreamed so fondly of a home like this; pleasant rooms shining in the sacred light of the hearth, his wife and children waiting to bid him welcome when the day's work was done. All other objects which men live and toil for seemed to him poor and worthless in the absence of this one dear incentive to exertion, this one sweet recompense for every care. Even Lidford House, which had never before seemed to him the perfection of a home, had a new aspect for him to-night, and reminded him sharply of his own loss. He envied Martin Lister the quiet jogtrot happiness of his domestic life; his love for and pride in his children; the calm haven of that comfortable hearth by which he sat to-night, with his slippered feet stretched luxuriously upon a fender-stool of his wife's manufacture, and his daughter sitting on a hassock close to his easy-chair, reading in a book of fairy tales.

Of course they were all delighted to see him, at once pleased and surprised by the unexpected visit. He had brought a great parcel of toys for the two children; and Selwyn Lister, a fine boisterous boy in a Highland costume, was summoned downstairs to assist at the unpacking of these treasures. It was half-past seven, and the Listers had dined at six; but in an incredibly short space of time the Sutherland table had been drawn out to a cosy position near the fire and spread with a substantial repast, while Mrs. Lister took her place behind the ponderous old silver urn which had been an heirloom in her husband's family for the last two centuries. The Listers were full of talk about their own travels—a long-delayed continental tour which had been talked of ever since their return from the honeymoon trip to Geneva and Chamouni; and were also very eager to hear Gilbert's adventures in Australia, of which he had given them only very brief accounts in his letters. There was nothing said that night about Marian, and Gilbert was grateful for his sister's forbearance.

CHAPTER VIII.

CALLED TO ACCOUNT.

Gilbert walked over to Heatherly after luncheon next day, taking of preference the way which led him past Captain Sedgewick's cottage and through the leafless wood, where he and Marian had walked together when the foliage was in its summer glory. The leaves lay thick upon the mossy ground now; and the gaunt bare branches of the trees had a weird awful look in the utter silence of the place. His footsteps trampling upon the fallen leaves had an echo; and he turned to look behind him more than once, fancying he was followed.

The old house, with its long lines of windows, had a prison-like aspect under the dull November day. Gilbert wondered how such a man as Sir David Forster could endure his existence there, embittered as it was by the memory of that calamity which had taken all the sunlight out of his

life, and left him a weary and purposeless hunter after pleasure. But Sir David had been prostrate under the heavy hand of his hereditary foe the gout for a long time past; and was fain to content himself with such company as came to him at Heatherly, and such amusement as was to be found in the society of men who were boon companions rather than friends. Gilbert Fenton heard the familiar clash of the billiard-balls as he went into the hall, where a couple of liver-coloured setters were dozing before a great fire that roared halfway up the wide chimney. There was no other life in the hall; and Mr. Fenton was conducted to the other end of the house, and ushered into that tobacco-tainted snuggery in which he had last seen the Baronet. His suspicions were on the alert this time; and he fancied that he could detect a look of something more than surprise in Sir David's face when the servant announced him—an uneasy look, as of a man taken at a disadvantage.

The Baronet was very gracious, however, and gave him a hearty welcome.

'I'm uncommonly glad to see you, my dear Fenton,' he said. 'Indeed, I have been pleased

to see worse fellows than you lately, since this infernal gout has laid me up in this dreary old place. The house is pretty full now, I am happy to say. I have friends who will come to shoot my partridges, though they won't remember my solitude in a charitable spirit before the first of September. You'll stop and dine, I hope; or perhaps you can put-up here altogether for a week or so. My housekeeper shall find you a good room; and I can promise you pleasant company. Say yes, now, like a good fellow, and I'll send a man to Lidford for your traps.'

'Thanks—no. You are very kind; but I am staying with my sister for a few days, and must return to town before the end of the week. The fact of the matter is, Sir David, I have come here to-day to ask you for some explanation of your conduct at our last interview. I don't want to say anything rude or disagreeable; for I am quite willing to believe that you felt kindly towards me, even at the time when you deceived me. I suppose there are some positions in which a man can hardly expect fair play, and that mine was such a position. But you certainly did deceive me, Sir David, and grossly.'

'That last is rather an unpleasant word, Mr. Fenton. In what respect did I deceive you?'

'I came here on purpose to ask you if Mr. Holbrook, the man who robbed me of my promised wife, were a friend of yours; and you denied all knowledge of him.'

'Granted. And what then, my dear sir?'

'When I came to ask you that question, I had no special reason for supposing this Mr. Holbrook was known to you. It only struck me that, being a stranger in the village, as the result of my inquiries had proved to me, he might be one of your many visitors. I knew at that time that Mr. Holbrook had taken his wife to a farmhouse in Hampshire immediately after their marriage—a house lent to him by a friend; but I did not know that you had any estate in that county. I have been to Hampshire since then, and have found Mrs. Holbrook at the Grange, near Crosber—in your house.'

'You have found her! Well, Mr. Fenton, the circumstantial evidence is too strong for me, so I must plead guilty. Yes; I did deceive you when I told you that Holbrook was unknown to

me; but I had pledged my word to keep his secret—to give you no clue, should you ever happen to question me, that could lead to your discovery of your lost love's whereabouts. It was considered, I conclude, that any meeting between you two must needs result unpleasantly. At any rate, there was a strong desire to avoid you; and in common duty to my friend I was compelled to respect that desire.'

'Not a very manly wish on the part of my successful rival,' said Gilbert.

'It may have been the lady's wish rather than Mr. Holbrook's.'

'I have reason to know that it was otherwise. I have heard from Marian's own lips that she would have written a candid confession of the truth had she been free to do so. It was her husband who prevented her giving me notice of my desertion.'

'I cannot pretend to explain his conduct,' Sir David answered gravely. 'I only know that I pledged myself to keep his secret; and felt bound to do so, even at the cost of a lie.'

'And this man is your friend. You must know whether he is worthy to be Marian Nowell's

husband. The circumstances of her life do not seem to me favourable to happiness, so far as I have been able to discover them; nor did I think her looking happy when we met. But I should be glad to know that she has not fallen into bad hands.'

'And I suppose by this time your feelings have cooled down a little. You have abandoned those revengeful intentions you appeared to entertain when you were last in this house?'

'In a great measure, yes. I have promised Marian that, should I and her husband meet, as we must do, I believe, sooner or later, she need apprehend no violence on my part. He has won the prize; any open resentment would seem mere schoolboy folly. But you cannot suppose that I feel very kindly towards him, or ever shall.'

'Upon my soul, I think men are hardly responsible for their actions where a woman is concerned,' Sir David exclaimed, after a pause. 'We are the veriest slaves of destiny in these matters. A man sees the only woman in the world he can love too late to win her with honour. If he is strong enough to act nobly, he turns his back upon the scene of his temptation, all the more

easily should the lady happen to be staunch to her affianced, or her husband, as the case may be. But if *she* waver—if he sees that his love is returned—heaven help him! Honour, generosity, friendship, all go by the board: and for the light in those fatal eyes, for the dangerous music of that one dear voice, he sacrifices all he has held highest in life until that luckless time. I *know* that Holbrook held it no light thing to do you this wrong: I know that he fought manfully against temptation. But, you see, fate was the stronger; and he had to give way at the last.'

'I cannot agree with that way of looking at things, Sir David. The world is made up of people who take their own pleasure at any cost to others, and then throw the onus of their misdoing upon Providence. I have long ago forgiven the girl who jilted me, and have sworn to be her faithful and watchful friend in all the days to come. I want to be sure that her future is a bright one—much brighter than it seemed when I saw her in your lonely old house near Crosber. She has had money left her since then; so poverty can no longer be a reason for her being hidden from the world.'

'I am very glad to hear that; my friend is not a rich man.'

'So Marian told me. But I want to learn something more than that about him. Up to this moment he has been the most intangible being I ever heard of. Will you tell me who and what he is—his position in the world, and so on?'

'Humph!' muttered Sir David meditatively; 'I don't know that I can tell you much about him. His position is like that of a good many others of my acquaintance—rather vague and intangible, to use the word you employed just now. He is not well off; he is a gentleman by birth, with some small means of his own, and he "lives, sir, lives." That is about all I can say of him—from a worldly point of view. With regard to his affection for Miss Nowell, I know that he loved her passionately, devotedly, desperately—the strongest expression you can supply to describe a man's folly. I never saw any fellow so far gone. Heaven knows, I did my best to argue him out of his fancy—urged your claim, the girl's poverty, every reason against the marriage; but friendly argumentation of that kind goes very little way in such a case. He took his own course.

It was only when I found the business was decided upon, that I offered him my house in Hampshire: a place to which I never go myself, but which brings me in a decent income in the hands of a clever bailiff. I knew that Holbrook had no home ready for his wife, and I thought it would give them a pleasant retreat enough for a few months, while the honey and rose-leaves still sweetened the wine-cup of their wedded life. They have stayed there ever since, as you seem to know; so I conclude they have found the place agreeable. Confoundedly dreary, I should fancy it myself: but then I'm not a newly-married man.'

The Baronet gave a brief sigh, and his thoughts went back for a moment to the time when he too was in Arcadia; when a fair young wife was by his side, and when no hour of his existence seemed ever dull or weary to him. It was all changed now! He had billiards and whist, and horses and hounds, and a vast collection of gunnery, and great stores of wine in the gloomy arched vaults beneath the house, where a hundred prisoners had been kept under lock and key when Heatherly had fallen into the hands of the Cromwellian soldiery, and the faith-

ful retainers of the household were fain to lay down their arms. He had all things that make up the common pleasures and delights of a man's existence; but he had lost the love which had given these things a new charm, and without which all life seemed to him flat, stale, and unprofitable. He could sympathise with Gilbert Fenton much more keenly than that gentleman would have supposed possible; for a man suffering from this kind of affliction is apt to imagine that he has a copyright in that species of grief, and that no other man ever did or ever can experience a like calamity. The same manner of trouble may come to others, of course, but not with a similar intensity. Others will suffer and recover, and find a balm elsewhere. He alone is constant until death!

'And you can tell me nothing more about Mr. Holbrook?' he asked after a pause.

'Upon my honour, nothing. I think you will do wisely to leave these two people to take their own way in the future, without any interference on your part. You speak of watchful friendship and all that kind of thing, and I can quite appreciate your disinterested desire to befriend the

woman whom you once hoped to make your wife. But, believe me, my dear Fenton, no manner of good can possibly come of your intervention. Those two have chosen their road in life, and must travel along it, side by side, through good or evil fortune. Holbrook would naturally be jealous of any friendship between his wife and you; while such a friendship could not fail to keep alive bitter thoughts in your mind—could not fail to sharpen the regret which you fancy just now is to be lifelong. I have no doubt I seem to speak in a hard worldly spirit.'

'You speak like a man of the world, Sir David,' the other answered quietly; 'and I cannot deny that there is a certain amount of wisdom in your advice. No, my friendship is not wanted by either of those two, supposing even that I were generous enough to be able to give it to both. I have learnt that lesson already from Marian herself. But you must remember that I promised her poor old grandfather—the man who died a few days ago—that I would watch over her interests with patient fidelity, that I would be her friend and protector, if ever the hour should come in which she would need friendship

and protection. I am not going to forget this promise, or to neglect its performance; and in order to be true to my word, I am bound to make myself acquainted with the circumstances of her married life, and the character of her husband.'

'Cannot you be satisfied with knowing that she is happy?'

'I have seen her, Sir David, and am by no means assured of her happiness.'

'And yet it was a love-match on both sides. Holbrook, as I have told you, loved her passionately.'

'That passionate kind of love is apt to wear itself out very quickly with some men. Your bailiff's daughter complained bitterly of Mr. Holbrook's frequent absence from the Grange, of the dulness and loneliness of my poor girl's life.'

'Women are apt to be exacting,' Sir David answered with a deprecating shrug of the shoulders. 'My friend Holbrook has the battle of life to fight, and could not spend all his days playing the lover. If his wife has had money left her, that will make some difference in their position. A man is never at his best when he is worried by debts and financial difficulties.'

'And Mr. Holbrook was in debt when he married, I suppose?'

'He was. I must confess that I find that complaint a very common one among my acquaintance,' the Baronet added with a laugh.

'Will you tell me what this Holbrook is like in person, Sir David? I have questioned several people about him, and have never obtained anything beyond the vaguest kind of description.'

Sir David Forster laughed aloud at this request.

'What! you want to know whether your rival is handsome, I suppose? like a woman, who always commences her inquiries about another woman by asking whether she is pretty. My dear Fenton, all personal descriptions are vague. It is almost impossible to furnish a correct catalogue of any man's features. Holbrook is just one of those men whom it is most difficult to describe—not particularly good-looking, nor especially ill-looking; very clever, and with plenty of expression and character in his face. Older than you by some years, and looking older than he really is.'

'Thanks; but there is not one precise state-

ment in your description. Is the man dark or fair—short or tall?'

'Rather dark than fair; rather tall than short.'

'That will do, Sir David,' Gilbert said, starting suddenly to his feet, and looking the Baronet in the face intently. 'The man who robbed me of my promised wife is the man whom I introduced to her; the man who has come between me and all my hopes, who hides himself from my just anger, and skulks in the background under a feigned name, is the one friend whom I have loved above all other men — John Saltram!'

Sir David faced him without flinching. If it was acted surprise which appeared upon his countenance at the sound of John Saltram's name, the acting was perfect. Gilbert could discover nothing from that broad stare of blank amazement.

'In heaven's name, what can have put such a preposterous notion into your head?' Sir David asked coolly.

'I cannot tell you. The conviction has grown upon me, against my own will. Yes, I have hated myself for being able to suspect my friend. You do not know how I have loved that man, or how

our friendship began at Oxford long ago with something like hero-worship on my side. I thought that he was born to be great and noble; and heaven knows I have felt the disappointments and shortcomings of his career more keenly than he has felt them himself. No, Sir David, I don't think it is possible for any man to comprehend how I have loved John Saltram.'

'And yet, without a shred of evidence, you believe him guilty of betraying you.'

'Will you give me your word of honour that Marian's husband and John Saltram are not one and the same person?'

'No,' answered Sir David impatiently; 'I am tired of the whole business. You have questioned and cross-questioned me quite long enough, Mr. Fenton, and I have answered you to the best of my ability, and have given you rational advice, which you will of course decline to take. If you think your friend has wronged you, go to him, and tax him with that wrong. I wash my hands of the affair altogether, from this moment; but, without wishing to be offensive, I cannot help telling you, that to my mind you are acting very foolishly in this business.'

'I daresay it may seem so to you. You would think better of me if I could play the stoic, and say, "She has jilted me, and is dead to me henceforward." But I cannot do that. I have the memory of her peaceful girlhood—the happy days in which I knew her first—the generous protector who sheltered her life. I am pledged to the dead, Sir David.'

He left Heatherly soon after this, though the Baronet pressed him to stay to dinner.

CHAPTER IX.

TORMENTED BY DOUBT.

The long homeward walk gave Gilbert ample leisure for reflection upon his interview with Sir David: a very unsatisfactory interview at the best. Yes, the conviction that the man who had wronged him was no other than his own familiar friend, had flashed upon him with a new force as the Baronet answered his questions about John Holbrook. The suspicion which had entered his mind after he left the lonely farm-house near Crosber, and which he had done his uttermost to banish, as if it had been a suggestion of the evil one, came back to him to-day with a form and reality which it had lacked before. It seemed no longer a vague fancy, a dark unwelcome thought that bordered on folly. It had taken a new shape altogether, and appeared to him almost a certainty.

Sir David's refusal to make any direct denial

of the fact seemed to confirm his suspicion. Yet it was, on the other hand, just possible that Sir David, finding him on a false scent, should have been willing to let him follow it, and that the real offender should be screened by this suspicion of John Saltram. But then there arose in his mind a doubt that had perplexed him sorely for a long time. If his successful rival had been indeed a stranger to him, what reason could there be for so much mystery in the circumstances of the marriage? and why should Marian have so carefully avoided telling him anything about her husband? That his friend, having betrayed him, should shrink from the revelation of his falsehood, should adopt any underhand course to avoid discovery, seemed natural enough. Yet to believe this was to think meanly of the man whom he had loved so well, whom he had confided in so implicitly until the arising of this cruel doubt.

He had known long ago, when the first freshness of his boyish delusions faded away before the penetrating clear daylight of reality, — he had known long ago that his friend was not faultless; that except in that one faithful alliance with

himself, John Saltram had been fickle, wayward, vacillating, unstable, and inconstant, true to no dream of his youth, no ambition of his early manhood, content to drop one purpose after another, until his life was left without any exalted aim. But Gilbert had fancied his friend's nature was still a noble one in spite of the comparative failure of his life. It was very difficult for him to imagine it possible that this friend could act falsely and ungenerously, could steal his betrothed from him, and keep the secret of his guilt, pretending to sympathise with the jilted lover all the while.

But though Mr. Fenton told himself at one moment that this was impossible, his thoughts travelled back to the same point immediately afterwards, and the image of John Saltram arose before him as that of his hidden foe. He remembered the long autumn days which he and his friend had spent with Marian—those unclouded utterly happy days, which he looked back upon now with a kind of wonder. They had been so much together, Marian so bright and fascinating in her innocent enjoyment of the present, brighter and happier just then than she had

ever seemed to him before, Gilbert remembered with a bitter pang. He had been completely unsuspicious at the time, untroubled by one doubtful thought; but it appeared to him now that there had been a change in Marian from the time of his friend's coming — a new joyousness and vivacity, a keener delight in the simple pleasures of their daily life, and withal a fitfulness, a tendency to change from gaiety to thoughtful silence, that he had not remarked in her before.

Was it strange if John Saltram had fallen in love with her? was it possible to see her daily in all the glory of her girlish loveliness, made doubly bewitching by the sweetness of her nature, the indescribable charm of her manner—was it possible to be with her often, as John Saltram had been, and not love her? Gilbert Fenton had thought of his friend as utterly impregnable to any such danger; as a man who had spent all his stock of tender emotion long ago, and who looked upon matrimony as a transaction by which he might mend his broken fortunes. That this man should fall a victim to the same subtle charm which had subjugated himself, was a possibility that never occurred to Gilbert's mind, in this

happy period of his existence. He wanted his friend's approval of his choice; he wished to see his passion justified in the eyes of the man whom it was his habit to regard in somewise as a superior creature; and it had been a real delight to him to hear Mr. Saltram's warm praises of Marian.

Looking back at the past to-day from a new point of view, he wondered at his own folly. What was more natural than that John Saltram should have found his doom, as he had found it, unthought of, undreamed of, swift, and fatal? Nor was it difficult for him to believe that Marian—who had perhaps never really loved him, who had been induced to accept him by his own pertinacity and her uncle's eager desire for the match—should find a charm and a power in John Saltram that had been wanting in himself. He had seen too many instances of his friend's influence over men and women, to doubt his ability to win this innocent inexperienced girl, had he set himself to win her. He recalled with a bitter smile how his informants had all described his rival in a disparaging tone, as unworthy of so fair a bride; and he knew that it was precisely those qualities

which these common people were unable to appreciate that constituted the subtle charm by which John Saltram influenced others. The rugged power and grandeur of that dark face, which vulgar critics denounced as plain and unattractive, the rare fascination of a manner that varied from an extreme reserve to a wild reckless vivacity, the magic of the deep full voice, with its capacity for the expression of every shade of emotion—these were attributes to be passed over and ignored by the vulgar, yet to exercise a potent influence upon sensitive sympathetic natures.

'How that poor little Anglo-Indian widow loves him, without any effort to win or hold her affection on his side!' Gilbert said to himself, as he walked back to Lidford in the darkening November afternoon, brooding always on the one subject which occupied all his thoughts; 'and can I doubt his power to supersede me if he cared to do so—if he really loved Marian, as he never has loved Mrs. Branston? What shall I do? Go to him at once, and tell him my suspicion, tax him broadly with treachery, and force him to a direct confession or denial? Shall I do this? Or shall I bide my time, wait and watch with dull

dogged patience, till I can collect some evidence of his guilt? Yes, let it be so. If he has been base enough to do me this great wrong—mean enough to steal my betrothed under a false name, and to keep the secret of his wrong-doing at any cost of lies and deceit—let him go on to the end, let him act out the play to the last; and when I bring his falsehood home to him, as I must surely do, sooner or later,—yes, if he is capable of deceiving me, he shall continue the lie to the last, he shall endure all the infamy of his false position.'

And then, after a pause, he said to himself,

'And at the end, if my suspicions are confirmed, I shall have lost all I have ever valued in life since my mother died—my plighted wife, and the one chosen friend whose companionship could make existence pleasant to me. God grant that this fancy of mine is as baseless as Sir David Forster declared it to be! God grant that I may never find a secret enemy in John Saltram!'

Tossed about thus upon a sea of doubts, Mr. Fenton returned to Lidford House, where he was expected to be bright and cheerful, and entertain his host and hostess with the freshest gossip of

the London world. He did make a great effort to keep up a show of cheerfulness at the dinner-table; but he felt that his sister's eyes were watching him with a pitiless scrutiny, and he knew that the attempt was an ignominious failure.

When honest Martin was snoring in his easy-chair before the drawing-room fire, with the red light shining full upon his round healthy countenance, Mrs. Lister beckoned her brother over to her side of the hearth, where she had an embroidery-frame, whereon was stretched some grand design in Berlin wool-work, to which she devoted herself every now and then with a great show of industry. She had been absorbed in a profound calculation of the stitches upon the canvas and on the coloured pattern before her until this moment; but she laid aside her work with a solemn air when Gilbert went over to her, and he knew at once what was coming.

'Sit down, Gilbert,' she said; and her brother dropped into a chair by her side with a faint sigh of resignation. 'I want to talk to you seriously, as a sister ought to talk to a brother, without any fear of offending. I'm very sorry to see you have

not yet forgotten that wicked ungrateful girl Marian Nowell.'

'Who told you that I have not forgotten her?'

'Your own face, Gilbert. It's no use for you to put on a pretence of being cheerful and light-hearted with me. I know you too well to be deceived by that kind of thing—I could see how absent-minded you were all dinner-time, in spite of your talk. You can't hoodwink an affectionate sister.'

'I don't wish to hoodwink you, my dear,' Mr. Fenton answered quietly, 'or to affect a happiness which I do not feel, any more than I wish to make a parade of my grief. It is natural for an Englishman to be reticent on such matters; but I do not mind owning to you that Marian Nowell is unforgotten by me, and that the loss of her will have an enduring influence upon my life; and having said as much as that, Belle, I must request that you will not expatiate any more upon this poor girl's breach of faith. I have forgiven her long ago, and I shall always regard her as the purest and dearest of women.'

'What! you can hold her up as a paragon of perfection after she has thrown you over in the

most heartless manner? Upon my word, Gilbert, I have no common patience with such folly. Your weakness in this affair from first to last has been positively deplorable.'

'I am sorry you disapprove of my conduct, Belle; but as it is not a very pleasant subject, don't you think we may as well avoid it now and henceforward?'

'O, very well, Gilbert,' the lady exclaimed, with an offended air; 'of course, if you choose to exclude me from your confidence, I must submit; but I do think it rather hard that your only sister should not be allowed to speak of a business that concerns you so nearly.'

'What good can arise out of any discussion of this subject, Belle? You think me weak and foolish; granted that I am both, you cannot cure me of my weakness or my folly.'

'And am I never to hope that you will find some one else, better worthy of your regard than Marian Nowell?'

'I fear not, Belle. For me there is no one else.'

Mrs. Lister breathed a profound sigh, and resumed the counting of her stitches. Yet perhaps,

after all, it was better that her brother should cherish the memory of this unlucky attachment. It would preserve him from the hazard of any imprudent alliance in the future, and leave his fortune free, to descend by and by to the juvenile Listers. Isabella was not a particularly mercenary person, but she was a woman of the world, and had an eye to the future aggrandisement of her children.

She was very kind and considerate to Gilbert after this, carefully avoiding any farther allusions to his lost love, and taking all possible pains to make his visit pleasant to him. She was so affectionate and cordial, and seemed so really anxious for him to stay, that he could not in common decency hurry back to town quite so soon as he had intended. He prolonged his visit to the end of that week, and then to the beginning of the next; and when he did at last find himself free to return to London, the second week was nearly ended.

CHAPTER X.

MISSING AGAIN.

Gilbert Fenton was very glad to have made his escape from Lidford at last, for his mind was full of anxiety about Marian. Again and again he had argued with himself upon the folly and uselessness of this anxiety. She, for whose interests he was so troubled, was safe enough no doubt, protected by a husband, who was most likely a man of the world, and quite as able to protect her as Gilbert himself could be. He told himself this; but still the restless uneasy sense that he was neglecting his duty, that he was false to the promise made to old Jacob Nowell, tormented and perplexed him. He felt that he ought to be doing something—that he had no right to remain in ignorance of the progress of Marian's affairs—that he should be at hand to frustrate any attempt at knavery on the part of the lawyer—to be sure

that the old man's wealth suffered no diminution before it reached the hands of his heiress.

Gilbert Fenton felt that his promise to the dead bound him to do these things, and felt at the same time the weakness of his own position with relation to Marian. By what right could he interfere in the conduct of her affairs? what claim could he assert to defend her interests? who would listen to any romantic notion about a promise made to the dead?

He went to Queen-Anne's-court upon the night of his return to London. The silversmith's shop looked exactly the same as when he had first seen it: the gas burning dimly, the tarnished old salvers and tankards gleaming duskily in the faint light, with all manner of purple and greenish hues. Mr. Tulliver was in his little den at the back of the shop, and emerged with his usual rapidity at the ringing of the door-bell.

'O, it's you, is it, sir?' he asked in an indifferent, half-insolent tone. 'What can I do for you this evening?'

'Is your late master's granddaughter, Mrs. Holbrook, here?' Gilbert asked.

'No; Mrs. Holbrook went away on the morn-

ing after my master's death. I told you that when you called here last.'

'I am quite aware of that; but I thought it likely Mrs. Holbrook might return here with her husband, to take possession of the property, which I suppose you know now belongs to her.'

'Yes, I know all about that; but she hasn't come yet to take possession; she doesn't seem in such a desperate hurry about it. I daresay she knows that things are safe enough. Medler the lawyer is not the kind of party to be cheated out of sixpence. He has taken an inventory of every article in the place, and the weight and value of every article. Your friend Mrs. Holbrook needn't be afraid. I suppose she's some relation of yours, by the bye, sir, judging by the interest you seem to take in her affairs?'

'Yes,' Gilbert said, not caring to answer this question directly; 'I do take a warm interest in Mrs. Holbrook's affairs, and I am very anxious to see her placed in undisputed possession of her late grandfather's property.'

'I should think her husband would see after that,' Mr. Tulliver remarked with a sneer.

Gilbert left the court after having asked a few

questions about Jacob Nowell's funeral. The old man had been buried at Kensal-green, followed to the grave only by the devoted Tulliver, Mr. Medler, and the local surgeon who had attended him in his last illness. He had lived a lonely friendless life, holding himself aloof from his fellow-creatures; and there were neither neighbours nor friends to lament his ending. The vagabond boys of the neighbourhood had clustered round the door to witness the last dismal ceremony of Mr. Nowell's existence, and had hung about the shop-front for some time after the funeral *cortège* had departed, peering curiously down into the darksome area, and speculating upon the hoards of wealth which the old miser had hidden away in coal-cellars and dust-bins, under the stone flags of the scullery, or in the crannies of the dilapidated walls. There were no bounds to the imagination of these street Arabs, who had been in the habit of yelping and whooping at the old man's heels when he took his infrequent walks abroad, assailing him with derisive epithets alluding to his miserly propensities. Amongst the elders of the court there was some little talk about the dead man, and the probable disposal of his

property, with a good deal of argument and laying down of the law on the part of the graver and wiser members of that community; some people affecting to know to a sixpence the amount of Jacob Nowell's savings, others accrediting him with the possession of fabulous riches, and all being unanimous in the idea that the old man's heir or heirs, as the case might be, would speedily scatter his long-hoarded treasures. Many of these people could remember the silversmith's prodigal son; but none among them were aware of that gentleman's return. They wondered a good deal as to whether he was still living, and whether the money had been left to him or to that pretty young woman who had appeared in the last days of the old man's life, no one knowing whence she had come. There was nothing to be gained from questioning Luke Tulliver, the court knew of old experience. The most mysterious dungeons of the Spanish Inquisition, the secret chambers under the leads in Venice, were not closer or deeper than the mind of that young man. The court had been inclined to think that Luke Tulliver would come into all his master's money; and opinion inclined that way even yet, seeing that

Mr. Tulliver still held his ground in the shop, and that no strangers had been seen to enter the place since the funeral.

From Queen-Anne's-court Gilbert Fenton went on to the gloomy street where Mr. Medler had his office and abode. It was not an hour for a professional visit: but Gilbert found the lawyer still hard at work at his desk, under the lurid light of a dirty-looking battered old oil-lamp, which left the corners of the dingy wainscoted room in profound obscurity. He looked up from his papers with some show of surprise on hearing Mr. Fenton's name announced by the slipshod maid-of-all-work who had admitted the late visitor, Mr. Medler's solitary clerk having departed to his own dwelling some hours before.

'I must ask you to excuse this untimely call, Mr. Medler,' Gilbert said politely; 'but the fact of the matter is, I am a little anxious about my friend Mrs. Holbrook and her affairs, and I thought you the most likely person to give me some information about them. I should have called in business hours; but I have only just returned from the country, and did not care to delay my inquiries until to-morrow. I have just

come from Queen-Anne's-court, and am rather surprised to find that neither Mrs. Holbrook nor her husband has been there. You have seen or heard from them since the funeral, I suppose?'

'No, Mr. Fenton, I have neither seen nor heard of them. I wrote a formal letter to Mrs. Holbrook, setting out the contents of the will; but there has been no answer as yet.'

'Strange, is it not?' Gilbert exclaimed, with an anxious look.

'Well, yes, it is certainly not the usual course of proceeding. However, there is time enough yet. The funeral has not been over much more than a week. The property is perfectly safe, you know.'

'Of course; but it is not the less extraordinary that Mr. Holbrook should hang back in this manner. I will go down to Hampshire the first thing to-morrow and see Mrs. Holbrook.'

'Humph!' muttered the lawyer; 'I can't say that I see any necessity for that. But of course you know best.'

Gilbert Fenton did start for Hampshire early the next morning by the same train in which

Marian had travelled after her grandfather's death. It was still quite early in the day when he found himself at Malsham, that quiet comfortable little market-town where he had first discovered a clue to the abode of his lost love. He went to the hotel and hired a fly to take him to Crosber, where he left the vehicle at the old inn, preferring to walk on to the Grange. It was a bright November day, with a pale yellow sunlight shining on the level fields, and distant hills that rose beyond them crowned with a scanty fringe of firs, that stood out black and sharp against the clear autumn sky. It was a cheerful day, and a solitary bird was singing here and there, as if beguiled by that pleasant warmth and sunshine into the fond belief that winter was still far off, and the glory of fields and woods not yet departed. Gilbert's spirits rose in some degree under the influence of that late brightness and sweet rustic calm. He fancied that there might be still some kind of happiness for him in the long years to come; pale and faint like the sunlight of to-day—an autumnal calm. If he might be Marian's friend and brother, her devoted counsellor, her untiring servant, it seemed to him that he could be con-

tent, that he could live on from year to year moderately happy in the occasional delight of her society; rewarded for his devotion by a few kind words now and then,—a letter, a friendly smile,—rewarded still more richly by her perfect trust in him.

These thoughts were in his mind to-day as he went along the lonely country lane leading to the Grange; thoughts which seemed inspired by the tranquil landscape and peaceful autumn day; thoughts which were full of the purest love and charity,—yes, even for his unknown rival, even if that rival should prove to be the one man in all this world from whom a deep wrong would seem most bitter.

'What am I, that I should measure the force of his temptation,' he said to himself, 'or the strength of his resistance? Let me be sure that he loves my darling as truly as I love her, that the chief object of his life has been and will be her happiness, and then let me put away all selfish vindictive thoughts, and fall quietly into the background of my dear one's life, content to be her brother and her friend.'

The Grange looked unchanged in its sombre

lonely aspect. The chrysanthemums were all withered by this time, and there were now no flowers in the old-fashioned garden. The bell was answered by the same woman who had admitted him before, and who made no parley about letting him in this time.

'My young missus said I was to be sure and let her know if you came, sir,' she said; 'she's very anxious to see you.'

'Your young mistress; do you mean Mrs. Holbrook?'

'No, sir; Miss Carley, master's daughter.'

'Indeed! I remember the young lady; I shall be very happy to see her if she has anything to say to me: but it is Mrs. Holbrook I have come to see. She is at home, I suppose?'

'O dear no, sir: Mrs. Holbrook has left, without a word of notice, gone nobody knows where. That is what has made our young missus fret about it so.'

'Mrs. Holbrook has left!' Gilbert exclaimed in blank amazement; 'when?'

'It's more than a week ago now, sir.'

'And do none of you know why she went away, or where she has gone?'

'No more than the dead, sir. But you'd better see Miss Carley; she'll be able to tell you all about it.'

The woman led him into the house, and to the room in which he had seen Marian. There was no fire here to-day, and the room had a desolate unoccupied look, though the sun was shining cheerfully on the old-fashioned many-paned windows. There were a few books, which Gilbert remembered as Marian's literary treasures, neatly arranged on a rickety old chiffonier by the fireplace, and the desk and work-basket which he had seen on his previous visit.

He was half bewildered by what the woman had told him, and his heart beat tumultuously as he stood by the empty hearth, waiting for Ellen Carley's coming. It seemed to him as if the girl never would come. The ticking of an old eight-day clock in the hall had a ghastly sound in the dead silence of the house, and an industrious mouse made itself distinctly heard behind the wainscot.

At last a light rapid footstep came tripping across the hall, and Ellen Carley entered the room. She was looking paler than when Gil-

bert had seen her last, and the bright face was very grave.

'For heaven's sake tell me what this means, Miss Carley,' Gilbert began eagerly. 'Your servant tells me that Mrs. Holbrook has left you—in some mysterious way, I imagine, from what the woman said.'

'O sir, I am so glad you have come here; I should have written to you if I had known where to address a letter. Yes, sir, she has gone—that dear sweet young creature—and I fear some harm has come to her.'

The girl burst into tears, and for some minutes could say no more.

'Pray, pray be calm,' Gilbert said gently, 'and tell me all you can about this business. How did Mrs. Holbrook leave this place? and why do you suspect that any harm has befallen her?'

'There is every reason to think so, sir. Is it like her to leave us without a word of notice, knowing, as she must have known, the unhappiness she would cause to me, who love her so well, by such a step? She knew how I loved her. I think she had scarcely a secret from me.'

'If you will only tell me the manner of her departure,' Gilbert said rather impatiently.

'Yes, yes, sir; I am coming to that directly. She seemed happier after she came back from London, poor dear; and she told me that her grandfather had left her money, and that she was likely to become quite a rich woman. The thought of this gave her so much pleasure—not for her own sake, but for her husband's, whose cares and difficulties would all come to an end now, she told me. She had been back only a few days, when I left home for a day and a night, to see my aunt—an old woman and a constant invalid, who lives at Malsham. I had put off going to her for a long time, for I didn't care about leaving Mrs. Holbrook; but I had to go at last, my aunt thinking it hard that I couldn't spare time to spend a day with her, and tidy up her house a bit, and see to the girl that waits upon her, poor helpless thing. So I started off before noon one day, after telling Mrs. Holbrook where I was going, and when I hoped to be back. She was in very good spirits that morning, for she expected her husband next day. "I have told him nothing about the good fortune that has come to

me, Nelly," she said; "I have only written to him, begging him to return as quickly as possible, and he will be here to-morrow by the afternoon express." Mr. Holbrook is a great walker, and generally walks from Malsham here, by a shorter way than the high-road, across some fields and by the river-bank. His wife used always to go part of the way to meet him when she knew he was coming. I know she meant to go and meet him this time. The way is very lonely, and I have often felt fidgety about her going alone, but she hadn't a bit of fear; and I didn't like to offer to go with her, feeling sure that Mr. Holbrook would be vexed by seeing me at such a time. Well, sir, I had arranged everything comfortably, so that she should miss nothing by my being away, and I bade her good-bye, and started off to walk to Malsham. I can't tell you how hard it seemed to me to leave her, for it was the first time we had been parted for so much as a day since she came to the Grange. I thought of her all the while I was at my aunt's; who has very fidgety ways, poor old lady, and isn't a pleasant person to be with. I felt quite in a fever of impatience to get home again; and was very glad

when a neighbour's spring-cart dropped me at the end of the lane, and I saw the gray old chimneys above the tops of the trees. It was four o'clock in the afternoon when I got home; father was at tea in the oak-parlour where we take our meals, and the house was as quiet as a grave. I came straight to this room, but it was empty; and when I called Martha, she told me Mrs. Holbrook had gone out at one o'clock in the day, and had not been home since, though she was expected back to dinner at three. She had been away three hours then, and at a time when I knew she could not expect Mr. Holbrook, unless she had received a fresh letter from him to say that he was coming by an earlier train than usual. I asked Martha if there had been any letters for Mrs. Holbrook that day; and she told me yes, there had been one by the morning post. It was no use asking Martha what kind of letter it looked, and whether it was from Mr. Holbrook, for the poor ignorant creature can neither read nor write, and one handwriting is the same as another to her. Mrs. Holbrook had told her nothing as to where she was going, only saying that she would be back in an hour or two. Martha

let her out at the gate, and watched her take the way towards the river-bank, and, seeing this, made sure she was going to meet her husband. Well, sir, five o'clock struck, and Mrs. Holbrook had not come home. I began to feel seriously uneasy about her. I told my father so; but he took the matter lightly enough at first, saying it was no business of ours, and that Mrs. Holbrook was just as well able to take care of herself as any one else. But after five o'clock I couldn't rest a minute longer; so I put on my bonnet and shawl and went down by the river-bank, after sending one of the farm-labourers to look for my poor dear in the opposite direction. It's a very lonely walk at the best of times, though a few of the country folks do go that way between Malsham and Crosber on market-days. There's scarcely a house to be seen for miles, except Wyncomb Farmhouse, Stephen Whitelaw's place, which lies a little way back from the river-bank, about a mile from here; besides that and a solitary cottage here and there, you won't see a sign of human life for four or five miles. Anybody might be pushed into the river and made away with in broad daylight, and no one need be the

wiser. The loneliness of the place struck me with an awful fear that afternoon, and from that moment I began to think that I should never see Mrs. Holbrook again.'

'What of her husband? He was expected on this particular afternoon, you say?'

'He was, sir; but he did not come till the next day. It was almost dark when I went to the river-bank. I walked for about three miles and a half, to a gate that opened into the fields by which Mr. Holbrook came across from Malsham. I knew his wife never went farther than this gate, but used to wait for him here, if she happened to be the first to reach it. I hurried along, half running all the way, and calling aloud to Mrs. Holbrook every now and then with all my might. But there was no answer. Some men in a boat loaded with hay stopped to ask me what was the matter, but they could tell me nothing. They were coming from Malsham, and had seen no one along the bank. I called at Mr. Whitelaw's as I came back, not with much hope that I should hear anything; but what could I do but make inquiries anywhere and everywhere? I was almost wild with fright by

this time. They could tell me nothing at Wyncomb Farm. Stephen Whitelaw was alone in the kitchen smoking his pipe by a great fire. He hadn't been out all day, he told me, and none of his people had seen or heard anything out of the common. As to any harm having come to Mrs. Holbrook by the river-bank, he said he didn't think that was possible, for his men had been at work in the fields near the river all the afternoon, and must have seen or heard if there had been anything wrong. There was some kind of comfort in this, and I left the farm with my mind a little lighter than it had been when I went in there. I knew that Stephen Whitelaw was no friend to Mrs. Holbrook; that he had a kind of grudge against her because she had been on some one else's side — in — in something.' Ellen Carley blushed as she came to this part of her story, and then went on rather hurriedly to hide her confusion. 'He didn't like her, sir, you see. I knew this, but I didn't think it possible he could deceive me in a matter of life and death. So I came home, hoping to find Mrs. Holbrook there before me. But there were no signs of her, nor of her husband either, though

I had fully expected to see him. Even father owned that things looked bad now, and he let me send every man about the place—some one way, and some another—to hunt for my poor darling. I went into Crosber myself, though it was getting late by this time, and made inquiries of every creature I knew in the village; but it was all no good: no one had seen anything of the lady I was looking for.'

'And the husband?' Gilbert asked again; 'what of him?'

'He came next day at the usual hour, after we had been astir all night, and the farm-labourers had been far and wide looking for Mrs. Holbrook. I never saw any one seem so shocked and horrified as he did when we told him how his wife had been missing for more than four-and-twenty-hours. He is not a gentleman to show his feelings much at ordinary times, and he was quiet enough in the midst of his alarm; but he turned as white as death, and I never saw the natural colour come back to his face all the time he was down here.'

'How long did he stay?'

'He only left yesterday. He was travelling

about the country all the time, coming back here of a night to sleep, and with the hope that we might have heard something in his absence. The river was dragged for three days; but, thank God, nothing came of that. Mr. Holbrook set the Malsham police to work—not that they're much good, I think; but he wouldn't leave a stone unturned. And now I believe he has gone to London to get help from the police there. But O, sir, I can't make it out, and I have lain awake night after night thinking of it, and puzzling myself about it, until all sorts of dreadful fancies come into my mind.'

'What fancies?'

'O sir, I scarcely dare tell you; but I loved that sweet young lady so well, that I have been as watchful and jealous in all things that concerned her as if she had been my own sister. I have thought sometimes that her husband had grown tired of her; that, however dearly he might have loved her at first, as I suppose he did, his love had worn out little by little, and he felt her a burden to him. What other reason could there be for him to keep her hidden away in this dull place, month after month, when he must have

seen that her youth and beauty and gaiety of heart were slowly vanishing away, if he had eyes to see anything?'

'But, good heavens!' Gilbert exclaimed, startled by the sudden horror of the idea which Ellen Carley's words suggested, 'you surely do not imagine that Marian's husband had any part in her disappearance? that he could be capable of—'

'I don't know what to think, sir,' the girl answered, interrupting him. 'I know that I have never liked Mr. Holbrook—never liked or trusted him from the first, though he has been civil enough and kind enough in his own distant way to me. That dear young lady could not disappear off the face of the earth, as it seems she has done, without the evil work of some one. As to her leaving this place of her own free will, without a word of warning to her husband or to me, that I am sure she would never dream of doing. No, sir, there has been foul play of some kind, and I'm afraid I shall never see that dear face again.'

The girl said this with an air of conviction that sent a deadly chill to Gilbert Fenton's heart. It seemed to him in this moment of supreme an-

guish as if all his trouble of the past, all his vague fears and anxieties about the woman he loved, had been the foreshadowing of this evil to come. He had a blank helpless feeling, a dismal sense of his own weakness, which for the moment mastered him. Against any ordinary calamity he would have held himself bravely enough, with the natural strength of an ardent hopeful character; but against this mysterious catastrophe courage and manhood could avail nothing. She was gone, the fragile helpless creature he had pledged himself to protect; gone from all who knew her, leaving not the faintest clue to her fate. Could he doubt that this energetic warm-hearted girl was right, and that some foul deed had been done, of which Marian Holbrook was the victim?

'If she lives, I will find her,' he said at last, after a long pause, in which he had sat in gloomy silence, with his eyes fixed upon the ground, meditating the circumstances of Marian's disappearance. 'Living or dead, I will find her. It shall be the business of my life from this hour. All my serious thoughts have been of her from the moment in which I first knew her. They will be doubly hers henceforward.'

'How good and true you are!' Ellen Carley exclaimed admiringly, 'and how you must have loved her! I guessed when you were here last that it was you to whom she was engaged before her marriage, and told her as much; but she would not acknowledge that I was right. O, how I wish she had kept faith with you! how much happier she might have been as your wife!'

'People have different notions of happiness, you see, Miss Carley,' Gilbert answered with a bitter smile. 'Yes, you were right; it was I who was to have been Marian Nowell's husband, whose every hope of the future was bound up in her. But all that is past; whatever bitterness I felt against her at first—and I do not think I was ever very bitter—has passed away. I am nothing now but her friend, her steadfast and constant friend.'

'Thank heaven that she has such a friend,' Ellen said earnestly. 'And you will make it your business to look for her, sir?'

'The chief object of my life, from this hour.'

'And you will try to discover whether her husband is really true, or whether the search

that he has made for her has been a blind to hide his own guilt?'

'What grounds have you for supposing his guilt possible?' asked Gilbert. 'There are crimes too detestable for credibility; and this would be such a one. You may imagine that I have no friendly feeling towards this man, yet I cannot for an instant conceive him capable of harming a hair of his wife's head.'

'Because you have not brooded upon this business as I have, sir, for hours and hours together, until the smallest things seem to have an awful meaning. I have thought of every word and every look of Mr. Holbrook's in the past, and all my thoughts have pointed one way. I believe that he was tired of his sweet young wife; that his marriage was a burden and a trouble to him somehow; that it had arisen out of an impulse that had passed away.'

'All this might be, and yet the man be innocent.'

'He might be—yes, sir. It is a hard thing, perhaps, even to think him guilty for a moment. But it is so difficult to account in any common way for Mrs. Holbrook's disappearance. If there had been murder done' (the girl shuddered as

she said the words)—'a common murder, such as one hears of in lonely country places—surely it must have come to light before this, after the search that has been made all round about. But it would have been easy enough for Mr. Holbrook to decoy his wife away to London or anywhere else. She would have gone anywhere with him, at a moment's notice. She obeyed him implicitly in everything.'

'But why should he have taken her away from this place in a secret manner?' asked Gilbert; 'he was free to remove her openly. And then you describe him as taking an amount of trouble in his search for her, which might have been so easily avoided, had he acted with ordinary prudence and caution. Say that he wanted to keep the secret of his marriage from the world in which he lives, and to place his wife in even a more secluded spot than this—which scarcely seems possible—what could have been easier for him than to take her away when and where he pleased? No one here would have had any right to question his actions.'

Ellen Carley shook her head doubtfully.

'I don't know, sir,' she answered slowly; 'I

daresay my fancies are very foolish—they may have come perhaps out of thinking about this so much, till my brain has got addled, as one may say. But it flashed upon me all of a sudden one night, as Mr. Holbrook was standing in our parlour talking about his wife—it flashed upon me that he was in the secret of her disappearance, and that he was only acting with us in his pretence of anxiety and all that; I fancied there was a guilty look in his face, somehow.'

'Did you tell him about his wife's good fortune—the money left her by her grandfather?'

'I did, sir; I thought it right to tell him everything I could about my poor dear young lady's journey to London. She had told him of that in her letters, it seemed, but not about the money. She had been keeping that back for the pleasure of telling him with her own lips, and seeing his face light up, she said to me, when he heard the good news. I asked him about the letter which had come in the morning of the day she disappeared, and whether it was from him; but he said no, he had not written, counting upon being with his wife that evening. It was only at the last moment he was prevented coming.'

'You have looked for that letter, I suppose?'

'O yes, sir; I searched, and Mr. Holbrook too, in every direction, but the letter wasn't to be found. He seemed very vexed about it, very anxious to find it. We could not but think that Mrs. Holbrook had gone to meet some one that day, and that the letter had something to do with her going out. I am sure she would not have gone beyond the garden and the meadow for pleasure alone. She never had been outside the gate without me, except when she went to meet her husband.'

'Strange!' muttered Gilbert.

He was wondering about that letter: what could have been the lure which had beguiled Marian away from the house that day; what except a letter from her husband? It seemed hardly probable that she would have gone to meet any one but him, or that any one else would have appointed a meeting on the river-bank. The fact that she had gone out at an earlier hour than the time at which she had been in the habit of meeting her husband when he came from the Malsham station, went some way to prove that the letter had influenced her movements. Gil-

bert thought of the fortune which had been left to Marian, and which gave her existence a new value, perhaps exposed her to new dangers. Her husband's interests were involved in her life—her death, should she die childless, must needs deprive him of all advantage from Jacob Nowell's wealth. The only person to profit from such an event would be Percival Nowell: but he was far away, Gilbert believed, and completely ignorant of his reversionary interest in his father's property. There was Medler the attorney, a man whom Gilbert had distrusted from the first. It was just possible that the letter had been from him; yet most improbable that he should have asked Mrs. Holbrook to meet him out of doors, instead of coming to her at the Grange, or that she should have acceded to such a request, had he made it.

The whole affair was encompassed with mystery, and Gilbert Fenton's heart sank as he contemplated the task that lay before him.

'I shall spend a day or two in this neighbourhood before I return to town,' he said to Ellen Carley presently; 'there are inquiries that I should like to make with my own lips. I shall

be only going over old ground, I daresay, but it will be some satisfaction to me to do it for myself. Can you give me house-room here for a night or two, or shall I put up at Crosber?'

'I'm sure father would be very happy to accommodate you here, sir. We've plenty of room now—too much for my taste. The house seems like a wilderness now Mrs. Holbrook is gone.'

'Thanks. I shall be very glad to sleep here. There is just the chance that you may have some news for me, or I for you.'

'Ah, sir, it's only a very poor chance, I'm afraid,' the girl answered hopelessly.

She went with Gilbert to the gate, and watched him as he walked away towards the river. His first impulse was to follow the path which Marian had taken that day, and to see for himself what manner of place it was from which she had so mysteriously vanished.

CHAPTER XI.

IN BONDAGE.

Adela Branston found life very dreary in the splendid gloom of her town house. She would have infinitely preferred the villa near Maidenhead for the place of her occupation, had it not been for the fact that in London she was nearer John Saltram, and that any moment of any day might bring him to her side.

The days passed, however — empty useless days, frittered away in frivolous occupations, or wasted in melancholy idleness; and John Saltram did not come, or came so rarely that the only effect of his visits was to keep up the fever and restlessness of the widow's mind.

She had fancied that life would be so bright for her when the day of her freedom came; that she would reap so rich a harvest of happiness as a reward for the sacrifice which she had made in marrying old Michael Branston, and enduring his

peevishness and ill-health with tolerable good-humour during the half-dozen years of their wedded life. She had fancied this; and now her release had come to her, and was worthless in her sight, because the one man she cared for had proved himself cold and indifferent.

In spite of his coldness, however, she told herself that he loved her, that he had loved her from the earliest period of their acquaintance.

She was a poor weak little woman, the veriest spoilt child of fortune, and she clung to this belief with a fond foolish persistence, a blind devoted obstinacy, against which the arguments of Mrs. Pallinson were utterly vain, although that lady devoted a great deal of time and energy to the agreeable duty which she called 'opening dear Adela's eyes about that dissipated good-for-nothing Mr. Saltram.'

To a correct view of this subject Adela Branston's eyes were not to be opened in any wise. She was wilfully, resolutely blind, clinging to the hope that this cruel neglect on John Saltram's part arose only from his delicacy of feeling, and tender care for her reputation.

'But O, how I wish that he would come to

me!' she said to herself again and again, as those slow dreary days went by, burdened and weighed down by the oppressive society of Mrs. Pallinson, as well as by her own sad thoughts. 'My husband has been dead ever so long now, and what need have we to study the opinion of the world so much? Of course I wouldn't marry him till a year, or more, after poor Michael's death; but I should like to see him often, to be sure that he still cares for me as he used to care—yes, I am sure he used—in the dear old days at Maidenhead. Why doesn't he come to me? He knows that I love him. He must know that I have no brighter hope than to make him the master of my fortune; and yet he goes on in those dismal Temple chambers, toiling at his literary work as if he had not a thought in the world beyond earning so many pounds a week.'

This was the perpetual drift of Mrs. Branston's meditations; and in the absence of any sign or token of regard from John Saltram, all Mrs. Pallinson's attempts to amuse her, all the fascinations and accomplishments of the elegant Theobald, were thrown away upon an unreceptive soil.

There were not many amusements open to a

London public at that dull season of the year, except the theatres, and for those places of entertainment Mrs. Pallinson cherished a shuddering aversion. But there were occasional morning and evening 'recitals,' or concerts, where the music for the most part was of a classical and recondite character—feasts of melody, at which long-buried and forgotten sonatas of Gluck, or Bach, or Cherubini were introduced to a discriminating public for the first time; and to these Mrs. Pallinson and Theobald conducted poor Adela Branston, whose musical proclivities had never yet soared into higher regions than those occupied by the sparkling joyous genius of Rossini, and to whom the revived sonatas, or the familiar old-established gems of classical art, were as unintelligible as so much Hebrew or Syriac. Perhaps they were not much more delightful to Mrs. Pallinson; but that worthy matron had a profound veneration for the conventionalities of life, and these classical matinées and recitals seemed to her exactly the correct sort of thing for the amusement of a young widow whose husband had not very long ago been consigned to the tomb.

So poor Adela was dragged hither and thither

to gloomy concert-rooms, where the cold winter's light made the performers look pale and wan, or to aristocratic drawing-rooms, graciously lent to some favoured pianiste by their distinguished owners; and so, harassed and weary, but lacking spirit to oppose her own feeble inclinations to the overpowering force of Mrs. Pallinson's will, the helpless little widow went submissively wherever they chose to take her, tormented all the while by the thought of John Saltram's coldness, and wondering when this cruel time of probation would be at an end, and he would show himself her devoted slave once more. It was very weak and foolish to think of him like this, no doubt; undignified and unwomanly, perhaps; but Adela Branston was little more than a child in knowledge of the world, and John Saltram was the only man who had ever touched her heart. She stood quite alone in the world too, lonely with all her wealth, and there was no one to share her affection with this man, who had acquired so complete an influence over her.

She endured the dreary course of her days patiently enough for a considerable time, not knowing any means whereby she might release

herself from the society of her kinswoman, or put an end to the indefatigable attentions of the popular Maida-hill doctor. She would have gladly offered Mrs. Pallinson a liberal allowance out of her fortune to buy that lady off, and be her own mistress once more, free to act and think for herself, had she dared to make such a degrading proposition to a person of Mrs. Pallinson's dignity. But she could not venture to do this; and she felt that no one but John Saltram, in the character of her future husband, could release her from the state of bondage into which she had weakly suffered herself to fall. In the mean time she defended the man she loved with an unflinching spirit, resolutely refusing to have her eyes opened to the worthlessness of his character, and boldly declaring her disbelief of those sad accounts which Theobald affected to have heard from well-informed acquaintance of his own, respecting the follies and dissipations of Mr. Saltram's career, his debts, his love of gambling, his dealings with money-lenders, and other foibles common to the rake's progress.

It was rather a hard battle for the lonely little woman to fight, but she had fortune on her side;

and at the worst, her kinsfolk treated her with a certain deference, even while they were doing their utmost to worry her into an untimely grave. If little flatteries, and a perpetual indulgence in all small matters, such as a foolish nurse might give to a spoilt child, could have made Adela happy, she had certainly no reason to complain, for in this manner Mrs. Pallinson was the most devoted and affectionate of companions. If her darling Adela looked a little paler than usual, or confessed to suffering from a headache, or owned to being nervous or out of spirits, Mrs. Pallinson's anxiety knew no bounds, and Theobald was summoned from Maida-hill without a minute's delay, much to poor Adela's annoyance. Indeed, she grew in time to deny the headaches, and the low spirits, or the nervousness resolutely, rather than bring upon herself a visitation from Mr. Theobald Pallinson: and in spite of all this care and indulgence she felt herself a prisoner in her own house, somehow; more dependent than the humblest servant in that spacious mansion; and she looked out helplessly and hopelessly for some friend through whose courageous help she might recover her freedom. Perhaps she only thought

of one champion as at all likely to come to her rescue; indeed, her mind had scarcely room for more than that one image, which occupied her thoughts at all times.

Her captivity had lasted for a period which seemed a very long time, though it was short enough when computed by the ordinary standard of weeks and months, when a circumstance occurred which gave her a brief interval of liberty. Mr. Pallinson fell a victim to some slight attack of low fever; and his mother, who was really most devoted to this paragon of a son, retired from the citadel in Cavendish-square for a few days in order to nurse him. It was not that the surgeon's illness was in any way dangerous, but the mother could not trust her darling to the care of strangers and hirelings.

Adela Branston seemed to breathe more freely in that brief holiday. Relieved from Mrs. Pallinson's dismal presence, life appeared brighter and pleasanter all at once; a faint colour came back to the pale cheeks, and the widow was even beguiled into laughter by some uncomplimentary observations which her confidential maid ventured upon with reference to the absent lady.

'I'm sure the house itself seems lighter and more cheerful-like without her, ma'am,' said this young person, who was of a vivacious temperament, and upon whom the dowager's habitual dreariness had been a heavy affliction; 'and you're looking all the better already for not being worried by her.'

'Berners, you really must not say such things,' Mrs. Branston exclaimed reproachfully. 'You ought to know that my cousin is most kind and thoughtful, and does everything for the best.'

'O, of course, ma'am; but some people's best is quite as bad as other people's worst,' the maid answered sharply; 'and as to kindness and thoughtfulness, Mrs. Pallinson is a great deal too kind and thoughtful, I think; for her kindness and thoughtfulness won't allow you a moment's rest. And then, as if anybody couldn't see through her schemes about that precious son of hers—with his finicking affected ways!'

And at this point the vivacious Berners gave a little imitation of Theobald Pallinson, with which liberty Adela pretended to be very much offended, laughing at the performance nevertheless.

Mrs. Branston passed the first day of her

freedom in luxurious idleness. It was such an inexpressible relief not to hear the perpetual click of Mrs. Pallinson's needle travelling in and out of the canvas, as that irreproachable matron sat at her embroidery-frame, on which a group of spaniels, after Sir Edwin Landseer, were slowly growing into the fluffy life of Berlin wool; a still greater relief, not to be called upon to respond appropriately to the dull platitudes which formed the lady's usual conversation, when she was not abusing John Saltram, or sounding the praises of her beloved son.

The day was a long one for Adela, in spite of the pleasant sense of freedom; for she had begun the morning with the thought of what a delightful thing it would be if some happy accident should bring Mr. Saltram to Cavendish-square on this particular day; and having once started with this idea, she found herself counting the hours and half-hours with impatient watchfulness until the orthodox time for visiting was quite over, and she could no longer beguile herself with the hope that he would come. She wanted so much to see him alone. Since her husband's death, they had met only in the presence of Mrs. Pallinson, beneath

the all-pervading eye and within perpetual earshot of that oppressive matron. Adela fancied that if they could only meet for one brief half-hour face to face, without the restraint of that foreign presence, all misunderstanding would be at an end between them, and John Saltram's affection for her, in which she believed with a fond credulity, would reveal itself in all its truth and fulness.

'I daresay it is my cousin Pallinson who has kept him away from me all this time,' Adela said to herself with a very impatient feeling about her cousin Pallinson. 'I know how intolerant he is of any one he dislikes; and no doubt he has taken a dislike to her; she has done everything to provoke it, indeed, by her coldness and rudeness to him.'

That day went by, and the second and third day of the dowager's absence; but there was no sign of John Saltram. Adela thought of writing to ask him to come to her; but that seemed such a desperate step, she could not think how she should word the letter, or how she could give it to one of the servants to post. No, she would contrive to post it herself, if she did bring herself

to write. And then she thought of a still more desperate step. What if she were to call upon Mr. Saltram at his Temple chambers? It would be a most unwarrantable thing for her to do, of course; an act which would cause Mrs. Pallinson's hair to stand on end in virtuous horror, could it by any means come to her knowledge; but Adela did not intend that it ever should be known to Mrs. Pallinson; and about the opinion of the world in the abstract, Mrs. Branston told herself that she cared very little. What was the use of being a rich widow, if she was to be hedged-in by the restrictions which encompass the steps of an unwedded damsel just beginning life? Emboldened by the absence of her dowager kinswoman, Mrs. Branston felt herself independent, free to do a foolish thing, and ready to abide the hazard of her folly.

So, upon the fourth day of her freedom, despairing of any visit from John Saltram, Adela Branston ordered the solemn-looking butler to send for a cab, much to the surprise of that portly individual.

'Josephs has just been round asking about the carriage, mum,' he said, in a kind of sugges-

tive way; 'whether you'd please to want the b'rouche or the broom, and whether you'd drive before or after luncheon.'

'I shall not want the carriage this morning; send for a cab, if you please, Parker. I am going into the City, and don't care about taking the horses there.'

The solemn Parker bowed and retired, not a little mystified by this order. His mistress was a kind little woman enough, but such extreme consideration for equine comfort is hardly a feminine attribute, and Mr. Parker was puzzled. He told Josephs the coachman as much when he had dispatched an underling to fetch the cleanest four-wheeler procurable at an adjacent stand.

'She's a-going to her banker's, I suppose,' he said meditatively; 'going to make some new investments perhaps. Women are always a-fidgeting and chopping and changing with their money.'

Mrs. Branston kept the cab waiting half an hour, according to the fairest reckoning. She was very particular about her toilette that morning, and inclined to be discontented with the sombre plainness of her widow's garb, and to fancy that the delicate border of white crape round

her girlish face made her look pale, not to say sallow. She came downstairs at last, however, looking very graceful and pretty in her trailing mourning robes and fashionable crape bonnet, in which the profoundest depth of woe was made to express itself with a due regard to elegance. She came down to the homely hackney vehicle attended by the obsequious Berners, whose curiosity was naturally excited by this solitary expedition.

'Where shall I tell the man to drive, mum?' the butler asked, with the cab-door in his hand.

Mrs. Branston felt herself blushing, and hesitated a little before she replied,

'The Union Bank, Chancery-lane. Tell him to go by the Strand and Temple-bar.'

'I can't think what's come to my mistress,' Miss Berners remarked as the cab drove off. 'Catch *me* driving in one of those nasty vulgar four-wheel cabs, if I had a couple of carriages and a couple of pairs of horses at my disposal! There's some style about a hansom; but I never could abide those creepy-crawley four-wheelers.'

'I admire your taste, Miss Berners; and a dashing young woman like you's a credit to a hansom,' replied Mr. Parker gallantly. 'But there's

no accounting for the vagaries of the female sex; and I fancy somehow Mrs. B. didn't want any of us to know where she was going; she coloured-up so when I asked her for the direction. You may depend there's something up, Jane Berners. She's going to see some poor relation perhaps—Mile-end or Kentish-town way—and was ashamed to give the address.'

'I don't believe she has any relations, except old Mother Pallinson and her son,' Miss Berners answered.

And thereupon the handmaiden withdrew to her own regions with a discontented air, as one who had been that day cheated out of her legitimate rights.

CHAPTER XII.

ONLY A WOMAN.

The cabman did not hurry his tall raw-boned steed, and the drive to Temple-bar seemed a very long one to Adela Branston, whose mind was disturbed by the consciousness that she was doing a foolish thing. Many times during the journey she was on the point of stopping the man and telling him to drive back to Cavendish-square; but in spite of these moments of doubt and vacillation she suffered the vehicle to proceed, and only stopped the man when they were close to Temple-bar.

Here she told him where she wanted to go; upon which he plunged down an obscure side street, and stopped at one of the entrances to the Temple. Here Mrs. Branston alighted, and had to inquire her way to Mr. Saltram's chambers. She was so unaccustomed to be out alone, that this expedition seemed something almost awful

to her when she found herself helpless and solitary in that strange locality. She had fancied that the cab would drive straight to Mr. Saltram's door.

The busy lawyers flitting across those grave courts and passages turned to glance curiously at the pretty little widow. She had the air of a person not used to be on foot and unattended—a kind of aerial butterfly air, as of one who belonged to the useless and ornamental class of society; utterly different from the appearance of such humble female pedestrians as were wont to make the courts and alleys of the Temple a short-cut in their toilsome journeys to and fro. Happily a porter appeared, who was able to direct her to Mr. Saltram's chambers, and civilly offered to escort her there: for which service she rewarded him with half-a-crown, instead of the sixpence which he expected as his maximum recompense; she was so glad to have reached the shelter of the dark staircase in safety. The men whom she had met had frightened her by their bold admiring stares; and yet she was pleased to think that she was looking pretty.

The porter did not leave her until she had

been admitted by Mr. Saltram's boy, and then retired, promising to be in the way to see her back to her carriage. How the poor little thing trembled when she found herself on the threshold of that unfamiliar door! What a horrible dingy lobby it was! and how she pitied John Saltram for having to live in such a place! He was at home and alone, the boy told her; would she please to send in her card?

No, Mrs. Branston declined to send in her card. The boy could say that a lady wished to see Mr. Saltram.

The truth was, she wanted to surprise this man; to see how her unlooked-for presence would affect him. She fancied herself beloved by him, poor soul! and that she would be able to read some evidence of his joy at seeing her in this unexpected manner.

The boy went in to his master and announced the advent of a lady, the first he had ever seen in those dismal premises.

John Saltram started up from his desk and came with a hurried step to the door, very pale and almost breathless.

'A lady!' he gasped, and then fell back a pace

or two on seeing Adela, with a look which was very much like disappointment.

'You here, Mrs. Branston!' he exclaimed; 'I —you are the last person in the world I should have expected to see.'

Perhaps he felt that there was a kind of rudeness in this speech, for he added hastily, and with a faint smile,

'Of course I am not the less honoured by your visit.'

He moved a chair forward, the least dilapidated of the three or four which formed his scanty stock, and placed it near the neglected fire, which he tried to revive a little by a judicious use of the poker.

'You expected to see some one else, I think,' Adela said, quite unable to hide her wounded feelings.

She had seen the eagerness in his pale face when he came to the door, and the disappointed look with which he had recognised her.

'Scarcely; but I expected to receive news of some one else.'

'Some one you are very anxious to hear about, I should imagine, from your manner just now,'

said Adela, who could not forbear pressing the question a little.

'Yes, Mrs. Branston, some one about whom I am anxious; a relation, in short.'

She looked at him with a puzzled air. She had never heard him talk of his relations, had indeed supposed that he stood almost alone in the world; but there was no reason that it should be so, except his silence on the subject. She watched him for some moments in silence, as he stood leaning against the opposite angle of the chimney-piece waiting for her to speak. He was looking very ill, much changed since she had seen him last, haggard and worn, with the air of a man who had not slept properly for many nights. There was an absent far-away look in his eyes; and Adela Branston felt all at once that her presence was nothing to him; that this desperate step which she had taken had no more effect upon him than the commonest event of every-day life; in a word, that he did not love her. A cold deathlike feeling came over her as she thought this. She had set her heart upon this man's love, and had indeed some justification for supposing that it was hers. It seemed to her that life was

useless—worse than useless, odious and unendurable—without it.

But even while she was thinking this, with a cold blank misery in her heart, she had to invent some excuse for this unseemly visit.

'I have waited so anxiously for you to call,' she said at last, in a nervous hesitating way, 'and I began to fear that you must be ill, and I wished to consult you about the management of my affairs. My lawyers worry me so with questions which I don't know how to answer, and I have so few friends in the world whom I can trust except you: so at last I screwed up my courage to call upon you.'

'I am deeply honoured by your confidence, Mrs. Branston,' John Saltram answered, looking at her gravely with those weary haggard eyes, with the air of a man who brings his thoughts back to common life from some far-away region, with an effort. 'If my advice or assistance can be of any use to you, they are completely at your service. What is this business about which your solicitor bothers you?'

'I'll explain that to you directly,' Adela answered, taking some letters from her pocket-book.

'How good you are! I knew that you would help me; but tell me first why you have never been to Cavendish-square in all this long time. I fear I was right; you have been ill, have you not?'

'Not exactly ill, but very much worried and overworked.'

A light dawned on Adela Branston's troubled mind. She began to think that Mr. Saltram's strange absent manner, his apparent indifference to her presence, might arise from preoccupation, caused by those pecuniary difficulties from which the Pallinsons declared him so constant a sufferer. Yes, she told herself, it was trouble of this kind that oppressed him, that had banished him from her all this time. He was too generous to repair his shattered fortunes by means of her money; he was too proud to confess his fallen state.

A tender pity took possession of her. All that was most sentimental in her nature was awakened by the idea of John Saltram's generosity. What was the use of her fortune, if she could not employ it for the relief of the man she loved?

'You are so kind to me, Mr. Saltram,' she faltered, after a troubled pause; 'so ready to help me in my perplexities, I only wish you would allow

me to be of some use to you in yours, if you have any perplexities; and I suppose everybody has, of some kind or other. I should be so proud if you would give me your confidence — so proud and happy!' Her voice trembled a little as she said this, looking up at him all the while with soft confiding blue eyes, the fair delicate face looking its prettiest in the coquettish widow's head-gear.

A man must have been harder of heart than John Saltram who could remain unmoved by a tenderness so evident. This man was touched, and deeply. The pale careworn face grew more troubled, the firmly-moulded lips quivered ever so little, as he looked down at the widow's pleading countenance: and then he turned his head aside with a sudden half-impatient movement.

'My dear Mrs. Branston, you are too good to me; I am unworthy, I am in every way unworthy of your kindness.'

'You are not unworthy, and that is no answer to my question: only an excuse to put me off. We are such old friends, Mr. Saltram, you might trust me. You own that you have been worried — overworked — worried about money matters, perhaps. I know that gentlemen are generally

subject to that kind of annoyance; and you know how rich I am, how little employment I have for my money, though you can never imagine how worthless and useless it seems to me. Why won't you trust me? why won't you let me be your banker?'

She blushed crimson as she made this offer, dreading that the man she loved would turn upon her fiercely in a passion of offended pride. She sat before him trembling, dreading the might of his indignation.

But there was no anger in John Saltram's face when he looked round at her; only grief and an expression that was like pity.

'The offer is like you,' he said with suppressed feeling; 'but the worries of which I spoke just now are not money troubles. I do not pretend to deny that my affairs are embarrassed, and have been for so long that entanglement has become their normal state; but if they were ever so much more desperate, I could not afford to trade upon your generosity. No, Mrs. Branston, that is just the very last thing in this world that I could consent to do.'

'It is very cruel of you to say that,' Adela

answered, with the tears gathering in her clear blue eyes, and with a little childish look of vexation, which would have seemed infinitely charming in the eyes of a man who loved her. 'There can be no reason for your saying this, except that you do not think me worthy of your confidence—that you despise me too much to treat me like a friend. If I were that Mr. Fenton now, whom you care for so much, you would not treat me like this.'

'I never borrowed a sixpence from Gilbert Fenton in my life, though I know that his purse is always open to me. But friendship is apt to end when money transactions begin. Believe me, I feel your goodness, Mrs. Branston, your womanly generosity; but it is my own unworthiness that comes between me and your kindness. I can accept nothing from you but the sympathy which it is your nature to give to all who need it.'

'I do indeed sympathise with you; but it seems so hard that you will not consent to make some use of all that money which is lying idle. It would make me so happy if I could think it were useful to you; but I dare not say any more. I have said too much already, perhaps; only I

hope you will not think very badly of me for having acted on impulse in this way.'

'Think badly of you, my dear kind soul! What can I think, except that you are one of the most generous of women?'

'And about these other troubles, Mr. Saltram, which have no relation to money matters; you will not give me your confidence?'

'There is nothing that I can confide in you, Mrs. Branston. Others are involved in the matter of which I spoke. I am not free to talk about it.'

Poor Adela felt herself repulsed at every point. It seemed very hard. Had she been mistaken about this man all the time? mistaken and deluded in those old happy days during her husband's lifetime, when he had been so constant a visitor at the riverside villa, and had seemed exactly what a man might seem who cherished a tenderness which he dared not reveal in the present, but which, in a brighter future, might blossom into the full-blown flower of love?

'And now about your own affairs, my dear Mrs. Branston?' John Saltram said with a forced cheerfulness, drawing his chair up to the table

and assuming a business-like manner. 'These tiresome letters of your lawyers'; let me see what use I can be in the matter.'

Adela Branston produced the letters with rather an absent air. They were letters about very insignificant affairs: the renewal of a lease or two; the reinvestment of a sum of money that had been lent on mortgage, and had fallen in lately; transactions that scarcely called for the employment of Mr. Saltram's intellectual powers. But he gave them very serious attention nevertheless, well aware all the time that this business consultation was only the widow's excuse for her visit; and while she seemed to be listening to his advice, her eyes were wandering round the room all the time, noting the dust and confusion, the soda-water bottles huddled in one corner, the pile of books heaped in a careless mass in another, the half-empty brandy-bottle between a couple of stone ink-jars on the mantelpiece. She was thinking what a dreary place it was, and that there was the stamp of decay and ruin somehow upon the man who occupied it. And she loved him so well, and would have given all the world to have redeemed his life.

It is doubtful whether Adela Branston heard one syllable of that counsel which Mr. Saltram administered so gravely. Her mind was full of the failure of this desperate step which she had taken. He seemed farther from her now than before they had met, obstinately averse to profit by her friendship, cold and cruel.

'You will come and dine with us very soon, I hope,' she said as she rose to go. 'My cousin Mrs. Pallinson will be home in a day or two. She has been nursing her son for the last few days; but he is much better, and I expect her back immediately. We shall be so pleased to see you; you will name an early day, won't you? Monday shall we say, or Sunday? You can't plead business on Sunday.'

'My dear Mrs. Branston, I am really not well enough for visiting.'

'But dining with us does not come under the head of visiting. We will be quite alone, if you wish it. I shall be hurt if you refuse to come.'

'If you put it in that way, I cannot refuse; but I fear you will find me wretched company.'

'I am not afraid of that. And now I must

ask you to forgive me for having wasted so much of your time, before I say good-morning.'

'There has been no time of mine wasted. I have learned to know your generous heart even better than I knew it before, and I think I always knew that it was a noble one. Believe me, I am not ungrateful or indifferent to so much goodness.'

He accompanied her downstairs, and through the courts and passages to the place where she had left her cab, in spite of the ticket-porter, who was hanging about ready to act as escort. He saw her safely seated in the hackney vehicle, and then walked slowly back to his chambers, thinking over the interview which had just concluded.

'Poor little soul,' he said softly to himself; 'dear little soul! There are men who would go to the end of the world for a woman like that; yes, if she had not a sixpence. And to think that I, who thought myself so strong in the wisdom of the world, should have let such a prize slip through my fingers! For what? For a fancy, for a caprice that has brought confusion and shame upon me—disappointment and regret.'

He breathed a profound sigh. From first to

last life had been more or less a disappointment to this man. He had lived alone; lived for himself, despising the ambitious aims and lofty hopes of other men, thinking the best prizes this world can give scarcely worth that long struggle which is so apt to end in failure; perfect success was so rare a result, it seemed to him. He made a rough calculation of his chances in any given line when he was still fresh from college, and finding the figures against him, gave up all thought of doing great things. By and by, when his creditors grew pressing and it was necessary for him to earn money in some way, he found that it was no trouble to him to write; so he wrote with a spasmodic kind of industry, but a forty-horse power when he chose to exercise it. For a long time he had no thought of winning name or fame in literature. It was only of late it had dawned upon him that he had wasted labour and talent, out of which a wiser man would have created for himself a reputation; and that reputation is worth something, if only as a means of making money.

This conviction once arrived at, he had worked hard at a book which he thought must needs make some impression upon the world, whenever

he could afford time to complete it. In the mean while his current work occupied so much of his life, that he was fain to lay the *magnum opus* aside every now and then, and it still needed a month or two of quiet labour.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT FAULT.

Gilbert Fenton took up his abode at the dilapidated old inn at Crosber, thinking that he might be freer there than at the Grange; a dismal place of sojourn under the brightest circumstances, but unspeakably dreary for him who had only the saddest thoughts for his companions. He wanted to be on the spot, to be close at hand to hear tidings of the missing girl, and he wanted also to be here in the event of John Holbrook's return—to come face to face with this man, if possible, and to solve that question which had sorely perplexed him of late—the mystery that hung about the man who had wronged him.

He consulted Ellen Carley as to the probability of Mr. Holbrook's return. The girl seemed to think it very unlikely that Marian's husband would ever again appear at the Grange. His last

departure had appeared like a final one. He had paid every sixpence he owed in the neighbourhood, and had been liberal in his donations to the servants and hangers-on of the place. Marian's belongings he had left to Ellen Carley's care, telling her to pack them, and keep them in readiness for being forwarded to any address he might send. But his own books and papers he had carefully removed.

'Had he many books here?' Gilbert asked.

'Not many,' the girl answered; 'but he was a very studious gentleman. He spent almost all his time shut up in his own room reading and writing.'

'Indeed!'

In this respect the habits of the unknown corresponded exactly with those of John Saltram. Gilbert Fenton's heart beat a little quicker at the thought that he was coming nearer by a step to the solution of that question which was always uppermost in his mind now.

'Do you know if he wrote books—if he was what is called a literary man—living by his pen?' he asked presently.

'I don't know; I never heard his wife say

so. But Mrs. Holbrook was always reserved about him and his history. I think he had forbidden her to talk about his affairs. I know I used to fancy it was a dull life for her, poor soul, sitting in his room hour after hour, working while he wrote. He used not to allow her to be with him at all at first, but little by little she persuaded him to let her sit with him, promising not to disturb him by so much as a word—and she never did. She seemed quite happy when she was with him, contented, and proud to think that her presence was no hindrance to him.'

'And you think he loved her, don't you?'

'At first, yes; but I think a kind of weariness came over him afterwards, and that she saw it, and almost broke her heart about it. She was so simple and innocent, poor darling, it wasn't easy for her to hide anything she felt.'

Gilbert asked the bailiff's daughter to describe Mr. Holbrook to him, as she had done more than once before. But this time he questioned her closely, and contrived that her description of this man's outward semblance should be especially minute and careful.

Yes, the picture which arose before him as

Ellen Carley spoke was the picture of John Saltram. The description seemed in every particular to apply to the face and figure of his one chosen friend. But then all such verbal pictures are at best vague and shadowy, and Gilbert knew that he carried that one image in his mind, and would be apt unconsciously to twist the girl's words into that one shape. He asked if any picture or photograph of Mr. Holbrook had been left at the Grange, and Ellen Carley told him no, she had never even seen a portrait of Marian's husband.

He was therefore fain to be content with the description, which seemed so exactly to fit the friend he loved, the friend to whom he had clung with a deeper, stronger feeling since this miserable suspicion had taken root in his mind.

'I think I could have forgiven him if he had come between us in a bold and open way,' he said to himself, brooding over this harassing doubt of his friend; 'yes, I think I could have forgiven him in spite of the bitterness of losing her. But to steal her from me with cowardly treacherous secrecy, to hide my treasure in an obscure corner, and then grow weary of her, and blight her fair young life with his coldness,—can I forgive him

these things? can all the memory of the past plead with me for him when I think of these things? O God, grant that I am mistaken—that it is some other man who has done this, and not John Saltram; not the man I have loved and honoured for fifteen years of my life.'

But his suspicions were not to be put away, not to be driven out of his mind, let him argue against them as he might. He resolved therefore that as soon as he should have made every effort and taken every possible means towards the recovery of the missing girl, he would make it his business next to bring this thing home to John Saltram, or acquit him for ever.

It is needless to dwell upon that weary work which seemed destined to result in nothing but disappointment. The local constabulary and the London police alike exerted all their powers to obtain some trace of Marian Holbrook's lost footsteps; but no clue to the painful mystery was to be found. From the moment when she vanished from the eyes of the servant woman watching her departure from the Grange gate, she seemed to have disappeared altogether from the sight of mankind. If by some witchcraft she had melted

into the dim autumnal mist that hung about the river bank, she could not have left less trace, or vanished more mysteriously than she had done. The local constabulary gave in very soon, in spite of Gilbert Fenton's handsome payment in the present, and noble promises of reward in the future. The local constabulary were honest and uninventive. They shook their heads gloomily, and said 'Drownded.'

'But the river has been dragged,' Gilbert cried eagerly, 'and there has been nothing found.'

He shuddered at the thought of that which might have been hauled to shore in the foul weedy net. The face he loved, changed, disfigured, awful, the damp clinging hair.

'Holes,' replied the chief of the local constabulary sententiously; 'there's holes in that there river where you might hide half-a-dozen drownded men, and never hope to find 'em, no more than if they was at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. Lord bless your heart, sir, you Londoners don't know what a river is, in a manner of speaking,' added the man, who was most likely unacquainted with the existence of the Thames, compared with which noble stream this sluggish Hampshire river

was the veriest ditch. 'I've known a many poor creatures drownded in that river, and never one of 'em to come to light—not that the river was dragged for *them*. Their friends weren't of the dragging class, they weren't.'

The London police were more hopeful and more delusive. They were always hearing of some young lady newly arrived at some neighbouring town or village who seemed to answer exactly to the description of Mrs. Holbrook. And behold when Gilbert Fenton hurried off post-haste to the village or town, and presented himself before the lady in question, he found for the most part that she was ten years older than Marian, and as utterly unlike her as it was possible for one Englishwoman to be unlike another.

He possessed a portrait of the missing girl—a carefully finished photograph, which had been given to him in the brief happy time when she was his promised wife; and he caused this image to be multiplied and distributed wherever the search for Marian was being made. He neglected no possible means by which he might hope to obtain tidings; advertising continually, in town and country, and varying his advertise-

ments in such a manner as to insure attention either from the object of his inquiries, or any one acquainted with her.

But all his trouble was in vain. No reply, or, what was worse, worthless and delusive replies, came to his advertisements. The London police, who had pretended to be so hopeful at first, began to despair in a visible manner, having put all their machinery into play, and failed to obtain even the most insignificant result. They were fain to confess at last that they could only come to pretty much the same conclusion as that arrived at by their inferiors, the rustic officials: and agreed that in all probability the river hid the secret of Marian Holbrook's fate. She had been the victim of either crime or accident. Who should say which? The former seemed the more likely, as she had vanished in broad daylight, when it was scarcely possible that her footsteps could go astray; while in that lonely neighbourhood a crime was never impossible.

'She had a watch and chain, I suppose?' the officer inquired. 'Ladies will wear 'em.'

Gilbert ascertained from Ellen Carley that Marian had always worn her watch and chain,

had worn them when she left the Grange for the last time. She had a few other trinkets too, which she wore habitually, quaint old-fashioned things, of some value.

How well Gilbert remembered those little family treasures, which she had exhibited to him at Captain Sedgewick's bidding!

'Ah,' muttered the officer when he heard this, 'quite enough to cost her her life, if she met with one of your ugly customers. I've known a murder committed for the sake of three-and-sixpence in my time; and pushing a young woman into the river don't count for murder among that sort of people. You see, some one may come by and fish her out again; so it can't well be more than manslaughter.'

A dull horror came over Gilbert Fenton as he heard these professional speculations, but at the worst he could not bring himself to believe that these men were right, and that the woman he loved had been the victim of some obscure wretch's greed, slain in broad daylight for the sake of a few pounds' worth of jewelry.

When everything had been done that was possible to be done in that part of the country, Mr.

Fenton went back to London. But not before he had become very familiar with the household at the Grange. From the first he had liked and trusted Ellen Carley, deeply touched by her fidelity to Marian. He made a point of dropping in at the Grange every evening, when not away from Crosber following up some delusive track started by his metropolitan counsellors. He always went there with a faint hope that Ellen Carley might have something to tell him, and with a vague notion that John Holbrook might return unexpectedly, and that they two might meet in the old farmhouse. But Mr. Holbrook did not reappear, nor had Ellen any tidings for her evening visitor; though she thought of little else than Marian, and never let a day pass without making some small effort to obtain a clue to that mystery which now seemed so hopeless. Gilbert grew to be quite at home in the little wainscoted parlour at the Grange, smoking his cigar there nightly in a tranquil contemplative mood, while Mr. Carley puffed vigorously at his long clay pipe. There was a special charm for him in the place that had so long been Marian's home. He felt nearer to her, somehow, under that roof, and as if he must needs

be on the right road to some discovery. The bailiff, although prone to silence, seemed to derive considerable gratification from Mr. Fenton's visits, and talked to that gentleman with greater freedom than he was wont to display in his intercourse with mankind. Ellen was not always present during the whole of the evening, and in her absence the bailiff would unbosom himself to Gilbert on the subject of his daughter's undutiful conduct; telling him what a prosperous marriage the girl might make if she had only common sense enough to see her own interests in the right light, and wasn't the most obstinate self-willed hussy that ever set her own foolish whims and fancies against a father's wishes.

'But a woman's fancies sometimes mean a very deep feeling, Mr. Carley,' pleaded Gilbert; 'and what worldly-wise people call a good home, is not always a happy one. It's a hard thing for a young woman to marry against her inclination.'

'Humph,' muttered the bailiff in a surly tone. 'It's a harder thing for her to marry a pauper, I should think, and to bring a regiment of children into the world, always wanting shoes and

stockings. But you're a bachelor, you see, Mr. Fenton, and can't be expected to know what shoes and stockings are. Now there happens to be a friend of mine—a steady, respectable, middle-aged man—who worships the ground my girl walks on, and could make her mistress of as good a house as any within twenty miles of this, and give a home to her father in his old age into the bargain: for I'm only a servant here, and it can't be expected that I am to go on toiling and slaving about this place for ever. I don't say but what I've saved a few pounds, but I haven't saved enough to keep me out of the workhouse.'

This seemed to Gilbert rather a selfish manner of looking at a daughter's matrimonial prospects, and he ventured to hint as much in a polite way. But the bailiff was immovable.

'What a young woman wants is a good home,' he said decisively; 'whether she has the sense to know it herself, or whether she hasn't, that's what she's got to look for in life.'

Gilbert had not spent many evenings at the Grange before he had the honour of being introduced to the estimable middle-aged suitor, whose claims Mr. Carley was always setting forth to his

daughter. He saw Stephen Whitelaw, and that individual's colourless expressionless countenance, redeemed from total blankness only by the cunning visible in the small gray eyes, impressed him with instant distrust and dislike.

'God forbid that frank warm-hearted girl should ever be sacrificed to such a fellow as this,' he said to himself, as he sat on the opposite side of the hearth, smoking his cigar, and meditatively contemplating Mr. Whitelaw conversing in his slow solemn fashion with the man who was so eager to be his father-in-law.

In the course of that first evening of their acquaintance, Gilbert was surprised to see how often Stephen Whitelaw looked at him, with a strangely-attentive expression, that had something furtive in it, some hidden meaning, as it seemed to him. Whenever Gilbert spoke, the farmer looked up at him, always with the same sharp inquisitive glance, the same cunning twinkle in his small eyes. And every time he happened to look at Mr. Whitelaw during that evening, he found the watchful eyes turned towards him in the same unpleasant manner. The sensation caused by this kind of surveillance on the part of the farmer was

so obnoxious to him, that at parting he took occasion to speak of it in a friendly way.

'I fancy you and I must have met before to-night, Mr. Whitelaw,' he said; 'or that you must have some notion to that effect. You've looked at me with an amount of interest my personal merits could scarcely call for.'

'No, no, sir,' the farmer answered, in his usual slow deliberate way; 'it isn't that; I never set eyes on you before I came into this room to-night. But you see, Ellen, she's interested in you, and I take an interest in any one she takes to. And we've all of us thought so much about your searching for that poor young lady that's missing, and taking such pains, and being so patient like where another would have given in at the first set-off—so, altogether, you're a general object of interest, you see.'

Gilbert did not appear particularly flattered by this compliment. He received it at first with rather an angry look, and then, after a pause, was vexed with himself for having been annoyed by the man's clumsy expression of sympathy—for it was sympathy, no doubt, which Mr. Whitelaw wished to express.

'It has been sad work, so far,' he said. 'I suppose you can give me no hint, no kind of advice as to any step to be taken in the future.'

'Lord bless you, no, sir. Everything that could be done was done before you came here. Mr. Holbrook didn't leave a stone unturned. He did his duty as a man and a husband, sir. The poor young lady was drowned—there's no doubt about that.'

'I don't believe it,' Gilbert said, with a quiet resolute air, which seemed quite to startle Mr. Whitelaw.

'You don't believe she was drowned! You mean to say you think she's alive, then!' he asked, with unusual sharpness and quickness of speech.

'I have a firm conviction that she still lives; that, with God's blessing, I shall see her again.'

'Well, sir,' Mr. Whitelaw replied, relapsing into his accustomed slowness, and rubbing his clumsy chin with his still clumsier hand, in a thoughtful manner, 'of course it ain't my place to go against any gentleman's convictions—far from it; but if you see Mrs. Holbrook before the dead rise up out of their graves, my name isn't Stephen Whitelaw. You may waste your time and

your trouble, and you may spend your money as if it was so much water, but set eyes upon that missing lady you never will; take my word for it, or don't take my word for it, as you please.'

Gilbert wondered at the man's earnestness. Did he really feel some kind of benevolent interest in the fate of a helpless woman, or was it only a vulgar love of the marvellous and horrible that moved him? Gilbert leaned to the latter opinion, and was by no means inclined to give Stephen Whitelaw credit for any surplus stock of benevolence. He saw a good deal more of Ellen Carley's suitor in the course of his evening visits to the Grange, and had ample opportunity for observing Mr. Whitelaw's mode of courtship, which was by no means of the demonstrative order, consisting in a polite silence towards the object of his affections, broken only by one or two clumsy but florid compliments, delivered in a deliberate but semi-jocose manner. The owner of Wyncomb Farm had no idea of making hard work of his courtship. He had been angled for by so many damsels, and courted by so many fathers and mothers, that he fancied he had but to say the word when the time came, and the thing would be done.

Any evidence of avoidance, indifference, or even dislike upon Ellen Carley's part, troubled him in the smallest degree. He had heard people talk of young Randall's fancy for her, and of her liking for him, but he knew that her father meant to set his heel upon any nonsense of this kind; and he did not for a moment imagine it possible that any girl would resolutely oppose her father's will, and throw away such good fortune as he could offer her — to ride in her own chaise-cart, and wear a silk-gown always on Sundays, to say nothing of a gold watch and chain; and Mr. Whitelaw meant to endow his bride with a ponderous old-fashioned timepiece and heavy brassy-looking cable which had belonged to his mother.

CHAPTER XIV.

BAFFLED, NOT BEATEN.

The time came when Gilbert Fenton was fain to own to himself that there was no more to be done down in Hampshire: professional science and his own efforts had been alike futile. If she whom he sought still lived—and he had never for a moment suffered himself to doubt this—it was more than likely that she was far away from Crosber Grange, that there had been some motive for her sudden flight, unaccountable as that flight might seem in the absence of any clue to the mystery.

Every means of inquiry being exhausted in Hampshire, there was nothing left to Gilbert but to return to London—that marvellous city, where there always seems the most hope of finding the lost, wide as the wilderness is.

'In London I shall have clever detectives always at my service,' Gilbert thought; 'in Lon-

don I may be able to solve the question of John Holbrook's identity.'

So, apart from the fact that his own affairs necessitated his prompt return to the great city, Gilbert had another motive for leaving the dull rural neighbourhood where he had wasted so many anxious hours, so much thought and care.

For the rest, he knew that Ellen Carley would be faithful—always on the watch for any clue to the mystery of Marian Holbrook's fate, always ready to receive the wanderer with open arms, should any happy chance bring her back to the Grange. Assured of this, he felt less compunction in turning his back upon the spot where his lost love had vanished from the eyes of men.

Before leaving he gave Ellen a letter for Marian's husband, in the improbable event of that gentleman's reappearance at the Grange—a few simple earnest lines, entreating Mr. Holbrook to believe in the writer's faithful and brotherly affection for his wife, and to meet him in London on an early occasion, in order that they might together concert fresh means for bringing about her restoration to her husband and home. He reminded Mr. Holbrook of his friendship for Cap-

tain Sedgewick, and that good man's confidence in him, and declared himself bound by his respect for the dead to be faithful to the living—faithful in all forgiveness of any wrong done him in the past.

He went back to London cruelly depressed by the failure of his efforts, and with a blank dreary feeling that there was little more for him to do, except to wait the working of Providence, with the faint hope that one of those happy accidents which sometimes bring about a desired result when all human endeavour has been in vain, might throw a sudden light on Marian Holbrook's fate.

During the whole of that homeward journey he brooded on those dark suspicions of Mr. Holbrook which Ellen Carley had let fall in their earlier interviews. He had checked the girl on these occasions, and had prevented the full utterance of her thoughts, generously indignant that any suspicion of foul play should attach to Marian's husband, and utterly incredulous of such a depth of guilt as that at which the girl's hints pointed; but now that he was leaving Hampshire, he felt vexed with himself for not having

urged her to speak freely—not having considered her suspicions, however preposterous those suspicions might have appeared to him.

Marian's disappearance had taken a darker colour in his mind since that time. Granted that she had left the Grange of her own accord, having some special reason for leaving secretly, at whose bidding would she have so acted except her husband's—she who stood so utterly alone, without a friend in the world? But what possible motive could Mr. Holbrook have had for such an underhand course—for making a conspiracy and a mystery out of so simple a fact as the removal of his wife from a place whence he was free to remove her at any moment? Fair and honest motive for such a course there could be none. Was it possible, looking at the business from a darker point of view, to imagine any guilty reason for the carrying-out of such a plot? If this man had wanted to bring about a life-long severance between himself and his wife, to put her away somewhere, to keep her hidden from the eyes of the world—in plainer words, to get rid of her—might not this pretence of losing her, this affectation of distress at her loss, be a safe way

of accomplishing his purpose? Who else was interested in doing her any wrong? Who else could have had sufficient power over her to beguile her away from her home?

Pondering on these questions throughout all that weary journey across a wintry landscape of bare brown fields and leafless trees, Gilbert Fenton travelled London-wards, to the city which was so little of a home for him, but in which his life had seemed pleasant enough in its own commonplace fashion until that fatal summer evening when he first saw Marian Nowell's radiant face in the quiet church at Lidford.

He scarcely stopped to eat or drink at the end of his journey, regaling himself only with a bottle of soda-water imperceptibly flavoured with cognac by the hands of a ministering angel at the refreshment-counter of the Waterloo station, and then hurrying on at once in a hansom to that dingy street in Soho where Mr. Medler sat in his parlour like the proverbial spider waiting for the advent of some too confiding fly.

The lawyer was at home, and seemed in no way surprised to see Mr. Fenton.

'I have come to you about a bad business,

Mr. Medler,' Gilbert began, seating himself opposite the shabby-looking office-table, with its covering of dusty faded baize, upon which there seemed to be always precisely the same array of papers, in little bundles tied with red tape; 'but first let me ask you a question: Have you heard from Mrs. Holbrook?'

'Not a line.'

'And have you taken no farther steps, no other means of communicating with her?' Gilbert asked.

'Not yet. I think of sending my clerk down to Hampshire, or of going down myself perhaps, in a day or two, if my business engagements will permit me.'

'Do you not consider the case rather an urgent one, Mr. Medler? I should have supposed that your curiosity would have been aroused by the absence of any reply to your letters—that you would have looked at the business in a more serious light than you appear to have done—that you would have taken alarm, in short.'

'Why should I do so?' the lawyer demanded carelessly. 'It is Mrs. Holbrook's business to look after her affairs. The property is safe

enough. She can administer to the will as soon as she pleases. I certainly wonder that the husband has not been a little sharper and more active in the business.'

'You have heard nothing of him then, I presume?'

'Nothing.'

Gilbert remembered what Ellen Carley had told him about Marian's keeping the secret of her newly-acquired fortune from her husband, until she should be able to tell it to him with her own lips; waiting for that happy moment with innocent girlish delight in the thought that he was to owe prosperity to her.

It seemed evident, therefore, that Mr. Holbrook could know nothing of his wife's inheritance, nor of Mr. Medler's existence, supposing the lawyer's letter to have reached the Grange before Marian's disappearance, and to have been destroyed or carried away by her.

He inquired the date of this letter; whereupon Mr. Medler referred to a letter-book in which there was a facsimile of the document. It had been posted three days before Marian left the Grange.

Gilbert now proceeded to inform Mr. Medler of his client's mysterious disappearance, and all the useless efforts that had been made to solve the mystery. The lawyer listened with an appearance of profound interest and astonishment, but made no remark till the story was quite finished.

'You are right, Mr. Fenton,' he said at last. 'It is a bad business, a very bad business. May I ask you what is the common opinion among people in that part of the world—in the immediate neighbourhood of the event, as to this poor lady's fate?'

'An opinion with which I cannot bring myself to agree—an opinion which I pray God may prove as unfounded as I believe it to be. It is generally thought that Mrs. Holbrook has fallen a victim to some common crime—that she was robbed, and then thrown into the river.'

'The river has been dragged, I suppose?'

'It has; but the people about there seem to consider that no conclusive test.'

'Had Mrs. Holbrook anything valuable about her at the time of her disappearance?'

'Her watch and chain and a few other trinkets.'

'Humph! There are scoundrels about the country who will commit the darkest crime for the smallest inducement. I confess the business has rather a black look, Mr. Fenton, and that I am inclined to concur with the country people.'

'An easy way of settling the question for those not vitally interested in the lady's fate,' Gilbert answered bitterly.

'The lady is my client, sir, and I am bound to feel a warm interest in her affairs,' the lawyer said, with the lofty tone of a man whose finer feelings have been outraged.

'The lady was once my promised wife, Mr. Medler,' returned Gilbert, 'and now stands to me in the place of a beloved and only sister. For me the mystery of her fate is an all-absorbing question, an enigma to the solution of which I mean to devote the rest of my life, if need be.'

'A wasted life, Mr. Fenton; and in the mean time that river down yonder may hide the only secret.'

'O God!' cried Gilbert passionately, 'how eager every one is to make an end of this business! Even the men whom I paid and bribed to help me grew tired of their work, and aban-

doned all hope after the feeblest, most miserable attempts to earn their reward.'

'What can be done in such a case, Mr. Fenton?' demanded the lawyer, shrugging his shoulders with a deprecating air. 'What can the police do more than you or I? They have only a little more experience, that's all; they have no recondite means of solving these social mysteries. You have advertised, of course?'

'Yes, in many channels, with a certain amount of caution, but in such a manner as to insure Mrs. Holbrook's identification, if she had fallen into the hands of any one willing to communicate with me, and to insure her own attention, were she free to act for herself.'

'Humph! Then it seems to me that everything has been done that can be done.'

'Not yet. The men whom I employed in Hampshire — they were recommended to me by the Scotland-yard authorities, certainly—may not have been up to the mark. In any case, I shall try some one else. Do you know anything of the detective force?'

Mr. Medler assumed an air of consideration, and then said, 'No, he did not know the name

of a single detective; his business did not bring him in contact with that class of people.' He said this with the tone of a man whose practice was of the loftiest and choicest kind—conveyancing perhaps, and the management of estates for the landed gentry, marriage-settlements involving the disposition of large fortunes, and so on; whereas Mr. Medler's business lying chiefly among the criminal population, his path in life might have been supposed to be not very remote from the footsteps of eminent police-officers.

'I can get the information elsewhere,' Gilbert said carelessly. 'Believe me, I do not mean to let this matter drop.'

'My dear sir, if I might venture upon a word of friendly advice — not in a professional spirit, but as between man and man—I should warn you against wasting your time and fortune upon a useless pursuit. If Mrs. Holbrook has vanished from the world of her own free will—a thing that often happens, eccentric as it may be—she will reappear in good time of her own free will. If she has been the victim of a crime, that crime will no doubt come to light in due course, without any efforts of yours.'

'That is the common kind of advice, Mr. Medler,' answered Gilbert. 'Prudent counsel, no doubt, if a man could be content to take it, and well meant; but, you see, I have loved this lady, love her still, and shall continue so to love her till the end of my life. It is not possible for me to rest in ignorance of her fate.'

'Although she jilted you in favour of Mr. Holbrook?' suggested the lawyer with something of a sneer.

'That wrong has been forgiven. Fate did not permit me to be her husband, but I can be her friend and brother. She has need of some one to stand in that position, poor girl! for her lot is very lonely. And now I want you to explain the conditions of her grandfather's will. It is her father who would profit, I think I gathered from our last conversation, in the event of Marian's death.'

'In the event of her dying childless—yes, the father would take all.'

'Then he is really the only person who could profit by her death?'

'Well, yes,' replied the lawyer with some

slight hesitation; 'under her grandfather's will, yes, her father would take all. Of course, in the event of her father having died previously, the husband would come in as heir-at-law. You see it was not easy to exclude the husband altogether.'

'And do you believe that Mr. Nowell is still living to claim his inheritance?'

'I believe so. I fancy the old man had some tidings of his son before the will was executed; that he, in short, heard of his having been met with not long ago, over in America.'

'No doubt he will speedily put in an appearance now,' said Gilbert bitterly—'now that there is a fortune to be gained by the assertion of his identity.'

'Humph!' muttered the lawyer. 'It would not be very easy for him to put his hand on sixpence of Jacob Nowell's money, in the absence of any proof of Mrs. Holbrook's death. There would be no end of appeals to the Court of Chancery; and after all manner of formulas he might obtain a decree that would lock-up the property for twenty-four years. I doubt, if the executor chose to stick to technicals, and the business got

into chancery, whether Percival Nowell would live long enough to profit by his father's will.'

'I am glad of that,' said Gilbert. 'I know the man to be a scoundrel, and I am very glad that he is unlikely to be a gainer by any misfortune that has befallen his daughter. Had it been otherwise, I should have been inclined to think that he had had some hand in this disappearance.'

The lawyer looked at Mr. Fenton with a sharp inquisitive glance.

'In other words, you would imply that Percival Nowell may have made away with his daughter. You must have a very bad opinion of human nature, Mr. Fenton, to conceive anything so horrible.'

'My suspicions do not go quite so far as that,' said Gilbert. 'God forbid that it should be so. I have a firm belief that Marian Holbrook lives. But it is possible to get a person out of the way without the last worst crime of which mankind is capable.'

'It would seem more natural to suspect the husband than the father, I should imagine,' Mr. Medler answered, after a thoughtful pause.

'I cannot see that. The husband had nothing to gain by his wife's disappearance, and everything to lose.'

'He might have supposed the father to be dead, and that he would step into the fortune. He might not know enough of the law of property to be aware of the difficulties attending a succession of that kind. There is a most extraordinary ignorance of the law of the land prevailing among well-educated Englishmen. Or he may have been tired of his wife, and have seen his way to a more advantageous alliance. Men are not always satisfied with one wife in these days, and a man who married in such a strange underhand manner would be likely to have some hidden motive for secrecy.'

The suggestion was not without force for Gilbert Fenton. His face grew darker, and he was some time before he replied to Mr. Medler's remarks. That suspicion which of late had been perpetually floating dimly in his brain—that vague distrust of his one chosen friend John Saltram, flashed upon him in this moment with a new distinctness. If this man, whom he had so loved and trusted, had betrayed him, had so utterly

falsified his friend's estimate of his character, was it not easy enough to believe him capable of still deeper baseness, capable of growing weary of his stolen wife, and casting her off by some foul secret means, in order to marry a richer woman? The marriage between John Holbrook and Marian Nowell had taken place several months before Michael Branston's death, at a time when perhaps Adela Branston's admirer had begun to despair of her release. And then fate had gone against him, and Mrs. Branston's fortune lay at his feet when it was too late.

Thus, and thus only, could Gilbert Fenton account in any easy manner for John Saltram's avoidance of the Anglo-Indian's widow. A little more than a year ago it had seemed as if the whole plan of his life was built upon a marriage with this woman; and now that she was free, and obviously willing to make him the master of her fortune, he recoiled from the position, unreasonably and unaccountably blind or indifferent to its advantages.

'There shall be an end of these shapeless unspoken doubts,' Gilbert said to himself. 'I will see John Saltram to-day, and there shall be an

explanation between us. I will be his dupe and fool no longer. I will get at the truth somehow.'

Gilbert Fenton said very little more to the lawyer, who seemed by no means sorry to get rid of him. But at the door of the office he paused.

'You did not tell me the names of the executors to Jacob Nowell's will,' he said.

'You didn't ask me the question,' answered Mr. Medler curtly. 'There is only one executor —myself.'

'Indeed! Mr. Nowell must have had a very high opinion of you to leave you so much power.'

'I don't know about power. Jacob Nowell knew me, and he didn't know many people. I don't say that he put any especial confidence in me—for it was his habit to trust no one, his boast that he trusted no one. But he was obliged to name some one for his executor, and he named me.'

'Shall you consider it your duty to seek out or advertise for Percival Nowell?' asked Gilbert.

'I shall be in no hurry to do that, in the absence of any proof of his daughter's death. My first duty would be to look for her.'

'God grant you may be more fortunate than

I have been. There is my card, Mr. Medler. You will be so good as to let me have a line immediately, at that address, if you obtain any tidings of Mrs. Holbrook?'

'I will do so.'

CHAPTER XV.

STRICKEN DOWN.

A HANSOM carried Gilbert Fenton to the Temple, without loss of time. There was a fierce hurry in his breast, a heat and fever which he had scarcely felt since the beginning of his troubles; for his lurking suspicion of his friend had gathered shape and strength all at once, and possessed his mind now to the exclusion of every other thought.

He ran quickly up the stairs. The outer and inner doors of John Saltram's chambers were both ajar. Gilbert pushed them open, and went in. The familiar sitting-room looked just a little more dreary than usual. The litter of books and papers, inkstand and portfolio, was transferred to one of the side-tables, and in its place, on the table where his friend had been accustomed to write, Gilbert saw a cluster of medicine-bottles, a jug of toast-and-water, and

a tray with a basin of lukewarm greasy-looking beef-tea.

The door between the two rooms stood half open, and from the bedchamber within Gilbert heard the heavy painful breathing of a sleeper. He went to the door and looked into the room. John Saltram was lying asleep, in an uneasy attitude, with both arms thrown above his head. His face had a haggard look that was made all the more ghastly by two vivid crimson spots upon his sunken cheeks; there were dark purple rings round his eyes, and his beard was of more than a week's growth.

'Ill,' Gilbert muttered, looking aghast at this dreary picture, with strangely conflicting feelings of pity and anger in his breast; 'struck down at the very moment when I had determined to know the truth.'

The sick man tossed himself restlessly from side to side in his feverish sleep, changed his position two or three times with evident weariness and pain, and then opened his eyes and stared with a blank unseeing gaze at his friend. That look, without one ray of recognition, went to Gilbert's heart somehow.

'O God, how fond I was of him!' he said to himself. 'And if he has been a traitor! If he were to die like this, before I have wrung the truth from him—to die, and I not dare to cherish his memory—to be obliged to live-out my life with this doubt of him!'

This doubt! Had he much reason to doubt two minutes afterwards, when John Saltram raised himself on his gaunt arm, and looked piteously round the room?

'Marian!' he called, 'Marian!'

'Yes,' muttered Gilbert, 'it is all true. He is calling his wife.'

The revelation scarcely seemed a surprise to him. Little by little that suspicion, so vague and dim at first, had gathered strength, and now that all his doubts received confirmation from those unconscious lips, it seemed to him as if he had known his friend's falsehood for a long time.

'Marian, come here. Come, child, come,' the sick man cried in feeble imploring tones. 'What, are you afraid of me? Is this death? Am I dead, and parted from her? Would anything else keep her from me when I call for her,

the poor child that loved me so well? And I have wished myself free of her—God forgive me! —wished myself free.'

The words were muttered in broken gasping fragments of sentences; but Gilbert heard them and understood them very easily. Then, after looking about the room, and looking full at Gilbert without seeing him, John Saltram fell back upon his tumbled pillows and closed his eyes. Gilbert heard a slipshod step in the outer room, and turning round, found himself face to face with the laundress—that mature and somewhat depressing matron whom he had sought out a little time before, when he wanted to discover Mr. Saltram's whereabouts.

This woman, upon seeing him, burst forth immediately into jubilation.

'O, sir, what a providence it is that you've come!' she cried. 'Poor dear gentleman, he has been that ill, and me not knowing what to do more than a baby, except in the way of sending for a doctor when I see how bad he was, and waiting on him myself day and night, which I have done faithful, and am that worn-out in consequence, that I shake like a haspen, and can't

touch a bit of victuals. I had but just slipped round to the court, while he was asleep, poor dear, to give my children their dinner; for it's a hard trial, sir, having a helpless young family depending upon one; and it would but be fair that all I've gone through should be considered; for though I says it as shouldn't, there isn't one of your hired nurses would do more; and I'm willing to continue of it, provisoed as I have help at nights, and my trouble considered in my wages.'

'You need have no apprehension; you shall be paid for your trouble. Has he been long ill?'

'Well, sir, he took the cold as were the beginning of his illness a fortnight ago come next Thursday. You may remember, perhaps, as it came on awful wet in the afternoon, last Thursday week, and Mr. Saltram was out in the rain, and walked home in it,—not being able to get a cab, I suppose, or perhaps not caring to get one, for he was always a careless gentleman in such respects,—and come in wet through to the skin; and instead of changing his clothes, as a Christian would have done, just gives himself a shake like, as he might have been a new Fondling

dog that had been swimming, and sits down before the fire, which of course drawed out the steam from his things and made it worse, and writes away for dear life till twelve o'clock that night, having something particular to finish for them magazines, he says; and so, when I come to tidy-up a bit the last thing at night, I found him sitting at the table writing, and didn't take no more notice of me than a dog, which was his way, though never meant unkindly — quite the reverse.'

The laundress paused to draw breath, and to pour a dose of medicine from one of the bottles on the table.

'Well, sir, the next day he had a vi'lent cold, as you may suppose, and was low and languid-like, but went on with his writing, and it weren't no good asking him not. "I want money, Mrs. Pratt," he said; "you can't tell how bad I want money, and these people pay me for my stuff as fast as I send it in." The day after that he was a deal worse, and had a wandering way like, as if he didn't know what he was doing; and sat turning over his papers with one hand, and leaning his head upon the other, and groaned so that

it went through one like a knife to hear him. "It's no use," he said at last; "it's no use!" and then went and threw hisself down upon that bed, and has never got up since, poor dear gentleman! I went round to fetch a doctor out of Essex-street, finding as he was no better in the evening, and awful hot, and still more wandering-like—Mr. Mew by name, a very nice gentleman—which said as it were rheumatic fever, and has been here twice a day ever since.'

'Has Mr. Saltram never been in his right senses since that day?' Gilbert asked.

'O yes, sir; off and on for the first week he was quite hisself at times; but for the last three days he hasn't known any one, and has talked and jabbered a deal, and has been dreadful restless.'

'Does the doctor call it a dangerous case?'

'Well, sir, not to deceive you, he ast me if Mr. Saltram had any friends as I could send for; and I says no, not to my knowledge; "for," says Mr. Mew, "if he have any relations or friends near at hand, they ought to be told that he's in a bad way;" and only this morning he said as how he should like to call-in a physician, for the case was a bad one.'

'I see. There is danger evidently,' Gilbert said gravely. 'I will wait and hear what the doctor says. He will come again to-day, I suppose?'

'Yes, sir; he's sure to come in the evening.'

'Good; I will stay till the evening. I should like you to go round immediately to this Mr. Mew's house, and ask for the address of some skilled nurse, and then go on, in a cab if necessary, and fetch her.'

'I could do that, sir, of course,—not but what I feel myself capable of nursing the poor dear gentleman.'

'You can't nurse him night and day, my good woman. Do what I tell you, and bring back a professional nurse as soon as you can. If Mr. Mew should be out, his people are likely to know the address of such a person.'

He gave the woman some silver, and dispatched her; and then, being alone, sat down quietly in the sick-room to think-out the situation.

Yes, there was no longer any doubt; that piteous appeal to Marian had settled the question. John Saltram, the friend whom he had loved, was the traitor. John Saltram had stolen

his promised wife, had come between him and his fair happy future, and had kept the secret of his guilt in a dastardly spirit that made the act fifty times blacker than it would have seemed otherwise.

Sitting in the dreary silence of that sick chamber, a silence broken only by the painful sound of the sleeper's difficult breathing, many things came back to his mind; circumstances trivial enough in themselves, but invested with a grave significance when contemplated by the light of to-day's revelation.

He remembered those happy autumn afternoons at Lidford; those long, drowsy, idle days in which John Saltram had given himself up so entirely to the pleasure of the moment, with surely something more than mere sympathy with his friend's happiness. He remembered that last long evening at the cottage when this man had been at his best, full of life and gaiety; and then that sudden departure, which had puzzled him so much at the time, and yet had seemed no surprise to Marian. It had been the result of some suddenly-formed resolution perhaps, Gilbert thought.

'Poor wretch! he may have tried to be true

to me,' he said to himself, with a sharp bitter pain at his heart.

He had loved this man so well, that even now, knowing himself to have been betrayed, there was a strange mingling of pity and anger in his mind, and mixed with these a touch of contempt. He had believed in John Saltram; had fancied him nobler and grander than himself, somehow; a man who, under a careless half-scornful pretence of being worse than his fellows, concealed a nature that was far above the common herd; and yet this man had proved the merest caitiff, a weak cowardly villain.

'To take my hand in friendship, knowing what he had done, and how my life was broken! to pretend sympathy, to play-out the miserable farce to the very last! Great heaven, that the man I have honoured could be capable of so much baseness!'

The sleeper moved restlessly, the eyes were opened once more and turned upon Gilbert, not with the same utter blankness as before, but without the faintest recognition. The sick man saw some one watching him, and the figure was associated with an unreal presence, the phantom of

his brain, which had been with him often in the day and night.

'The man again!' he muttered. 'When will she come?' And then raising himself upon his elbow, he cried imploringly, 'Mother, you fetch her!'

He was speaking to his mother, whom he had loved very dearly—his mother who had been dead fifteen years.

Gilbert's mind went back to that far-away time in Egypt, when he had lain like this, helpless and unconscious, and this man had nursed and watched him with unwearying tenderness.

'I will see him safely through this,' he said to himself, 'and then—'

And then the account between them must be squared somehow. Gilbert Fenton had no thought of any direful vengeance. He belonged to an age in which injuries are taken very quietly, unless they are wrongs which the law can redress—wounds which can be healed by a golden plaster in the way of damages.

He could not kill his friend; the age of duelling was past, and he not romantic enough to be guilty of such an anachronism as mortal combat.

Yet nothing less than a duel to the death could avenge such a wrong.

So friendship was at an end between those two, and that was all; it was only the utter severance of a tie that had lasted for years, nothing more. Yet to Gilbert it seemed a great deal. His little world had crumbled to ashes; love had perished, and now friendship had died this sudden bitter death, from which there was no possible resurrection.

In the midst of such thoughts as these he remembered the sick man's medicine. Mrs. Pratt had given him a few hurried directions before departing on her errand. He looked at his watch, and then went over to the table and prepared the draught, and administered it with a firm and gentle hand.

'Who's that?' John Saltram muttered faintly. 'It seems like the touch of a friend.'

He dropped back upon the pillow without waiting for any reply, and fell into a string of low incoherent talk, with closed eyes.

The laundress was a long time gone, and Gilbert sat alone in the dismal little bedroom, where there had never been the smallest attempt at com-

fort since John Saltram had occupied it. He sat alone, or with that awful companionship of one whose mind was far away, which was so much more dreary than actual loneliness—sat brooding over the history of his friend's treachery.

What had he done with Marian? Was her disappearance any work of his, after all? Had he hidden her away for some secret reason of his own, and then acted-out the play by pretending to search for her? Knowing him for the traitor he was, could Gilbert Fenton draw any positive line of demarcation between the amount of guilt which was possible and that which was not possible to him?

What had he done with Marian? How soon would he be able to answer that question? or would he ever be able to answer it? The thought of this delay was torture to Gilbert Fenton. He had come here to-day thinking to make an end of all his doubts, to force an avowal of the truth from those false lips. And behold, a hand stronger than his held him back. His interrogation must await the answer to that awful question—life or death.

The woman came in presently, bustling and

out of breath. She had found a very trustworthy person, recommended by Mr. Mew's assistant—a person who would come that evening without fail.

'It was all the way up at Islington, sir, and I paid the cabman three-and-six altogether, which he said it were his fare. And how has the poor dear been while I was away?' asked Mrs. Pratt, with her head on one side and an air of extreme solicitude.

'Very much as you see him now. He has mentioned a name once or twice, the name of Marian. Have you ever heard that?'

'I should say I have, sir, times and often since he's been ill. "Marian, why don't you come to me?" so pitiful; and then, "lost, lost!" in such a awful wild way. I think it must be some favourite sister, sir, or a young lady as he has kep' company with.'

'Marian!' cried the voice from the bed, as if their cautious talk had penetrated to that dim brain. 'Marian! O no, no; she is gone; I have lost her! Well, I wished it; I wanted my freedom.'

Gilbert started, and stood transfixed, looking

intently at the unconscious speaker. Yes, here was the clue to the mystery. John Saltram had grown tired of his stolen bride—had sighed for his freedom. Who should say that he had not taken some iniquitous means to rid himself of the tie that had grown troublesome to him?

Gilbert Fenton remembered Ellen Carley's suspicions. He was no longer inclined to despise them.

It was dreary work to sit by the bedside watching that familiar face, to which fever and delirium had given a strange weird look; dismal work to count the moments, and wonder when that voice, now so thick of utterance as it went on muttering incoherent sentences and meaningless phrases, would be able to reply to those questions which Gilbert Fenton was burning to ask.

Was it a guilty conscience, the dull slow agony of remorse, which had stricken this man down—this strong powerfully-built man, who was a stranger to illness and all physical suffering? Was the body only crushed by the burden of the mind? Gilbert could not find any answer to these questions. He only knew that his sometime friend lay there helpless, unconscious, re-

moved beyond his reach as completely as if he had been lying in his coffin.

'O God, it is hard to bear!' he said half aloud: 'it is a bitter trial to bear. If this illness should end in death, I may never know Marian's fate.'

He sat in the sick man's room all through that long dismal afternoon, waiting to see the doctor, and with the same hopeless thoughts repeating themselves perpetually in his mind.

It was nearly eight o'clock when Mr. Mew at last made his evening visit. He was a grave gray-haired little man, with a shrewd face and a pleasant manner; a man who inspired Gilbert with confidence, and whose presence was cheering in a sick-room; but he did not speak very hopefully of John Saltram.

'It is a bad case, sir—a very bad case,' he said gravely, after he had made his careful examination of the patient's condition. 'There has been a violent cold caught, you see, through our poor friend's recklessness in neglecting to change his damp clothes, and rheumatic fever has set-in. But it appears to me that there are other causes at work—mental disturbance, and so on. Our

friend has been taxing his brain a little too severely, I gather from Mrs. Pratt's account of him; and these things will tell, sir; sooner or later they have their effect.'

'Then you apprehend danger?'

'Well, yes; I dare not tell you that there is an absence of danger. Mr. Saltram has a fine constitution, a noble frame; but the strain is a severe one, especially upon the mind.'

'You spoke just now of over-work as a cause for this mental disturbance. Might it not rather proceed from some secret trouble of mind, some hidden care?' Gilbert asked anxiously.

'That, sir, is an open question. The mind is unhinged; there is no doubt of that. There is something more here than the ordinary delirium we look for in fever cases.'

'You have talked of a physician, Mr. Mew; would it not be well to call one in immediately?'

'I should feel more comfortable if my opinion were supported, sir: not that I believe there is anything more can be done for our patient than I have been doing; but the case is a critical one, and I should be glad to feel myself supported.'

'If you will give me the name and address of

the gentleman you would like to call in, I will go for him immediately.'

'To-night? Nay, my dear sir, there is no occasion for such haste; to-morrow morning will do very well.'

'To-morrow morning, then; but I will make the appointment to-night, if I can.'

Mr. Mew named a physician high in reputation as a specialist in such cases as John Saltram's; and Gilbert dashed off at once in a hansom to obtain the promise of an early visit from this gentleman on the following morning. He succeeded in his errand; and on returning to the Temple found the professional nurse installed, and the sick-room brightened and freshened a little by her handiwork. The patient was asleep, and his slumber was more quiet than usual.

Gilbert had eaten nothing since breakfast, and it was now nearly nine o'clock in the evening; but before going out to some neighbouring tavern to snatch a hasty dinner, he stopped to tell Mrs. Pratt that he should sleep in his friend's chambers that night.

'Why, you don't mean that, sir, sure to good-

ness!' cried the laundress, alarmed; 'and not so much as a sofy bedstead, nor nothing anyways comfortable.'

'I could sleep upon three or four chairs, if it were necessary; but there is an old sofa in the bedroom. You might bring that into this room for me; and the nurse can have it in the day-time. She won't want to be lying down to-night, I daresay. I don't suppose I shall sleep much myself, but I am a little knocked-up, and shall be glad of some sort of rest. I want to be on the spot, come what may.'

'But, sir, with the new nurse and me, there surely can't be no necessity; and you might be round the first thing in the morning like, to see how the poor dear gentleman has slep.'

'I know that, but I would rather be on the spot. I have my own especial reasons. You can go home to your children.'

'Thank you kindly, sir; which I shall be very glad to take care of 'em, pore things. And I hope, sir, as you won't forget that I've gone through a deal for Mr. Saltram—if so be as he shouldn't get better himself, which the Lord forbid!—to take my trouble into consideration,

bein' as he were always a free-handed gentleman, though not rich.'

'Your services will not be forgotten, Mrs. Pratt, depend upon it. Perhaps I'd better give you a couple of sovereigns on account: that'll make matters straight for the present.'

'Yes, sir; and many thanks for your generosity,' replied the laundress, agreeably surprised by this prompt donation, and dropping grateful curtsies before her benefactor; 'and Mr. Saltram shall want nothing as my care can provide for him, you may depend upon it.'

'That is well. And now I am going out to get some dinner; I shall be back in half an hour.'

The press and bustle of the day's work was over at the tavern to which Gilbert bent his steps. Dinners and diners seemed to be done with for one more day; and there were only a couple of drowsy-looking waiters folding table-cloths and putting away cruet-stands and other paraphernalia in long narrow closets cut in the papered walls, and invisible by day.

One of these functionaries grew brisk again, with a wan factitious briskness, at sight of Gil-

bert, made haste to redecorate one of the tables, and in bland insinuating tones suggested a dinner of six courses or so, as likely to be agreeable to a lonely and belated diner; well aware in the depths of his inner consciousness, that the six courses would be all more or less warmings-up of viands that had figured in the day's bill of fare.

'Bring me a chop or a steak, and a pint of dry sherry,' Gilbert said wearily.

'Have a slice of turbot and lobster-sauce, sir —the turbot are uncommon fine to-day; and a briled fowl and mushrooms. It will be ready in five minutes.'

'You may bring me the fowl, if you like: I won't wait for fish. I'm in a hurry.'

The attendant gave a faint sigh, and communicated the order for the fowl and mushrooms through a speaking-tube. It was the business of his life to beguile his master's customers into over-eating themselves, and to set his face against chops and steaks; but he felt that this particular customer was proof against his blandishments. He took Gilbert an evening-paper, and then subsided into a pensive silence until the fowl appeared in an agreeable frizzling state, fresh

from the gridiron, but a bird of some experience notwithstanding, and wingless. It was a very hasty meal. Gilbert was eager to return to those chambers in the Temple—eager to be listening once more for some chance words of meaning that might be dropped from John Saltram's pale parched lips in the midst of incoherent ravings. Come what might, he wanted to be near at hand, to watch that sick-bed with a closer vigil than hired nurse ever kept; to be ready to surprise the briefest interval of consciousness that might come all of a sudden to that hapless fever-stricken sinner. Who should say that such an interval would not come, or who could tell what such an interval might reveal?

Gilbert Fenton paid for his dinner, left half his wine undrank, and hurried away; leaving the waiter with rather a contemptuous idea of him, though that individual condescended to profit by his sobriety, and finished the dry sherry at a draught.

It was nearly ten when Gilbert returned to the chambers, and all was still quiet, that heavy slumber continuing; an artificial sleep at the best, produced by one of Mr. Mew's sedatives.

The sofa had been wheeled from the bed-room to the sitting-room, and placed in a comfortable corner by the fire. There were preparations too for a cup of tea, to be made and consumed at any hour agreeable to the watcher; a small teakettle simmering on the hob; a tray with a cup and saucer, and queer little black earthenware teapot, on the table; a teacaddy and other appliances close at hand,—all testifying to the grateful attention of the vanished Pratt.

Gilbert shared the nurse's watch till past midnight. Long before that John Saltram woke from his heavy sleep, and there was more of that incoherent talk so painful to hear—talk of people that were dead, of scenes that were far away, even of those careless happy wanderings in which those two college friends had been together; and then mere nonsense talk, shreds and patches of random thought, that seemed to be drawn from some rubbish-chamber, some waste-paper basket of the brain.

It was weary work. He woke towards eleven, and a little after twelve dropped asleep again; but this time, the effect of the sedative having worn off, the sleep was restless and uneasy. Then

came a brief interval of quiet; and in this Gilbert left him, and flung himself down upon the sofa, to sink into a slumber that was scarcely more peaceful than that of the sick man.

He was thoroughly worn out, however, and slept for some hours, to be awakened suddenly at last by a shrill cry in the next room. He sprang up from the sofa, and rushed in. John Saltram was sitting up in bed, propped by the pillows on which his two elbows were planted, looking about him with a fierce haggard face, and calling for 'Marian.' The nurse had fallen asleep in her armchair by the fire, and was slumbering placidly.

'Marian,' he cried, 'Marian, why have you left me? God knows I loved you; yes, even when I seemed cold and neglectful. Everything was against me; but I loved you, my dear, I loved you! Did I ever say that you came between me and fortune — was I mean enough, base enough, ever to say that? It was a lie, my love; you were my fortune. Were poverty or obscurity hard things to bear for you? No, my darling, no; I will face them to-morrow, if you will come back to me. O no, no, she is gone; my life has gone;

I broke her heart with my hard bitter words; I drove my angel away from me.'

He had not spoken so coherently since Gilbert had been with him that day. Surely this must be an interval of consciousness, or semi-consciousness. Gilbert went to the bedside, and, seating himself there quietly, looked intently at the altered face, which stared at him without a gleam of recognition.

'Speak to me, John Saltram,' he said. 'You know me, don't you—the man who was once your friend, Gilbert Fenton?'

The other burst into a wild bitter laugh. 'Gilbert Fenton—my friend, the man who trusts me still! Poor old Gilbert! and I fancied that I loved him, that I would have freely sacrificed my own happiness for his.'

'And yet you betrayed him,' Gilbert said in a low distinct voice. 'But that may be forgiven, if you have been guilty of no deeper wrong than that. John Saltram, as you have a soul to be saved, what have you done with Marian—with—your wife?'

It cost him something, even in that moment of excitement, to pronounce those two words.

'Killed her!' the sick man answered with the same mad laugh. 'She was too good for me, you see; and I grew weary of her calm beauty, and I sickened of her tranquil goodness. First I sacrificed honour, friendship, everything to win her; and then I got tired of my prize. It is my nature, I suppose; but I loved her all the time; she had twined herself about my heart somehow. I knew it when she was lost.'

'What have you done with her?' repeated Gilbert in a low stern voice, and with his grasp upon John Saltram's arm.

'What have I done with her? I forget. She is gone—I wanted my freedom; I felt myself fettered, a ruined man. She is gone; and I am free, free to make a better marriage.'

'O God!' muttered Gilbert, 'is this man the blackest villain that ever cumbered the earth? What am I to think, what am I to believe?'

Again he repeated the same question, with a stern kind of patience, as if he would give this guilty wretch the benefit of every possible doubt, the unwilling pity which his condition demanded. Alas, he could obtain no coherent answer to his persistent questioning. Vague self-accusation,

mad reiteration of that one fact of his loss; nothing more distinct came from those fevered lips, nor did one look of recognition flash into those bloodshot eyes.

The time at which this mystery was to be solved had not come yet; there was nothing to be done but to wait, and Gilbert waited with a sublime patience through all the alternations of a long and wearisome sickness.

'Talk of friends,' Mrs. Pratt exclaimed in a private conference with the nurse; 'never did I see such a friend as Mr. Fenting, sacrificing of himself as he do, day and night, to look after that pore creature in there, and taking no better rest than he can get on that old horsehair sofy, which brickbats or knife-boards isn't harder, and never do you hear him murmur.'

And yet for this man, whose battle with the grim enemy death he watched so patiently, what feeling could there be in Gilbert Fenton's heart in all the days to come but hatred or contempt? He had loved him so well, and trusted him so completely, and this was the end of it.

Christmas came while John Saltram was lying at death's-door, feebly fighting that awful battle,

struggling unconsciously with the bony hand that was trying to drag him across that fatal threshold; just able to keep himself on this side of that dread portal beyond which there lies so deep a mystery, so profound a darkness. Christmas came; and there were bells ringing, and festive gatherings here and there about the great dreary town, and Gilbert Fenton was besieged by friendly invitations from Mrs. Lister, remonstrating with him for his want of common affection in preferring to spend that season among his London friends rather than in the bosom of his family.

Gilbert wrote to his sister telling her that he had particular business which detained him in town. But had it been otherwise, had he not been bound prisoner to John Saltram's sick-room, he would scarcely have cared to take his part in the conventional feastings and commonplace jovialities of Lidford House. Had he not dreamed of a bright home which was to be his at this time, a home beautified by the presence of the woman he loved? Ah, what delight to have welcomed the sacred day in the holy quiet of such a home, they two alone together, with all the world shut out!

CHAPTER XVI.

ELLEN CARLEY'S TRIALS.

Christmas came in the old farmhouse near Crosber; and Ellen Carley, who had no idea of making any troubled thoughts of her own an excuse for neglect of her household duties, made the sombre panelled rooms bright with holly and ivy, laurel and fir, and busied herself briskly in the confection of such pies and puddings as Hampshire considered necessary to the due honour of that pious festival. There were not many people to see the greenery and bright holly-berries which embellished the grave old rooms, not many whom Ellen very much cared for to taste the pies and puddings; but duty must be done, and the bailiff's daughter did her work with a steady industry which knew no wavering.

Her life had been a hard one of late, very lonely since Mrs. Holbrook's disappearance, and

haunted with a presence which was most hateful to her. Stephen Whitelaw had taken to coming to the Grange much oftener than of old. There was seldom an evening now on which his insignificant figure was not to be seen planted by the hearth in the snug little oak-parlour, smoking his pipe in that dull silent way of his, which was calculated to aggravate a lively person like Ellen Carley into some open expression of disgust or dislike. Of late, too, his attentions had been of a more pronounced character; he took to dropping sly hints of his pretensions, and it was impossible for Ellen any longer to doubt that he wanted her to be his wife. More than this, there was a tone of assurance about the man, quiet as he was, which exasperated Miss Carley beyond all measure. He had the air of being certain of success, and on more than one occasion spoke of the day when Ellen would be mistress of Wyncomb Farm.

On his repetition of this offensive speech one evening, the girl took him up sharply.

'Not quite so fast, if you please, Mr. Whitelaw,' she said; 'it takes two to make a bargain of that kind, just the same as it takes two to

quarrel. There's many curious changes may come in a person's life, no doubt, and folks never know what's going to happen to them; but whatever changes may come upon me, *that* isn't one of them. I may live to see the inside of the workhouse, perhaps, when I'm too old for service; but I shall never sleep under the roof of Wyncomb Farmhouse.'

Mr. Whitelaw gave a spiteful little laugh.

'What a spirited one she is, ain't she, now?' he said with a sneer. 'O, you won't, won't you, my lass: you turn-up that pretty little nose of yours — it do turn-up a bit of itself, don't it, though?—at Wyncomb Farm and Stephen Whitelaw; your father tells a different story, Nell.'

'Then my father tells a lying story,' answered the girl, blushing crimson with indignation; 'and it isn't for want of knowing the truth. He knows that, if it was put upon me to choose between your house and the union, I'd go to the union—and with a light heart too, to be free of you. I didn't want to be rude, Mr. Whitelaw; for you've been civil-spoken enough to me, and I daresay you're a good friend to my father; but I can't

help speaking the truth, and you've brought it on yourself with your nonsense.'

'She's got a devil of a tongue of her own, you see, Whitelaw,' said the bailiff with a savage glance at his daughter; 'but she don't mean above a quarter what she says — and when her time comes, she'll do as she's bid, or she's no child of mine.'

'O, I forgive her,' replied Mr. Whitelaw, with a placid air of superiority; 'I'm not the man to bear malice against a pretty woman, and to my mind a pretty woman looks all the prettier when she's in a passion. I'm not in a hurry, you see, Carley; I can bide my time; but I shall never take a mistress to Wyncomb unless I can take the one I like.'

After this particular evening, Mr. Whitelaw's presence seemed more than ever disagreeable to poor Ellen. He had the air of her fate somehow, sitting rooted to the hearth night after night, and she grew to regard him with a half superstitious horror, as if he possessed some occult power over her, and could bend her to his wishes in spite of herself. The very quietude of the man became appalling to her. Such a man seemed

capable of accomplishing anything by the mere force of persistence, by the negative power that lay in his silent nature.

'I suppose he means to sit in that room night after night smoking his pipe and staring with those pale stupid eyes of his, till I change my mind and promise to marry him,' Ellen said to herself, as she meditated angrily on the annoyance of Mr. Whitelaw's courtship. 'He may sit there till his hair turns gray—if ever such red hair does turn to anything better than itself—and he'll find no change in me. I wish Frank were here to keep up my courage. I think, if he were to ask me to run away with him, I should be tempted to say yes, at the risk of bringing ruin upon both of us; anything to escape out of the power of that man. But come what may, I won't endure it much longer. I'll run away to service soon after Christmas, and father will only have himself to thank for the loss of me.'

It was Mr. Whitelaw who appeared as principal guest at the Grange on Christmas-day; Mr. Whitelaw, supported on this occasion by a widowed cousin of his who had kept house for him for some years, and who bore a strong family likeness to

him both in person and manner, and Ellen Carley thought that it was impossible for the world to contain a more disagreeable pair. These were the guests who consumed great quantities of Ellen's pies and puddings, and who sat under her festal garlands of holly and laurel. She had been especially careful to hang no scrap of mistletoe, which might have afforded Mr. Whitelaw an excuse for a practical display of his gallantry; a fact which did not escape the playful observation of his cousin, Mrs. Tadman.

'Young ladies don't often forget to put up a bit of mistletoe,' said this matron, 'when there's a chance of them they like being by;' and she glanced in a meaning way from Ellen to the master of Wyncomb Farm.

'Miss Carley isn't like the generality of young ladies,' Mr. Whitelaw answered with a glum look, and his kinswoman was fain to drop the subject.

Alone with Ellen, sly Mrs. Tadman took occasion to launch-out into enthusiastic praises of her cousin; to which the girl listened in profound silence, closely watched all the time by the woman's sharp gray eyes. And then by degrees her tone changed ever so little, and she owned that

her kinsman was not altogether faultless; indeed it was curious to perceive what numerous shortcomings were coexistent with those shining merits of his.

'He has been a good friend to me,' continued the matron; 'that I never have denied and never shall deny. But I have been a good servant to him; ah, there isn't a hired servant as would toil and drudge, and watch and pinch, as I have done to please him, and never have had payment from him more than a new gown at Christmas, or a five-pound note after harvest. And of course, if ever he marries, I shall have to look for a new home; for I know too much of his ways, I daresay, for a wife to like to have me about her—and me of an age when it seems hard to have to go among strangers—and not having saved sixpence, where I might have put-by a hundred pounds easy, if I hadn't been working without wages for a relation. But I've not been called a servant, you see; and I suppose Stephen thinks that's payment enough for my trouble. Goodness knows I've saved him many a pound, and that he'll know when I'm gone; for he's near, is Stephen, and it goes to his heart to part with a shilling.'

'But why should you ever leave him, Mrs. Tadman?' Ellen asked kindly. 'I shouldn't think he could have a better housekeeper.'

'Perhaps not,' answered the widow, shaking her head with mysterious significance; 'but his wife won't think that; and when he's got a wife he'll want her to be his housekeeper, and to pinch and scrape as I've pinched and scraped for him, Lord help her!' concluded Mrs. Tadman, with a faint groan, which was far from complimentary to her relative's character.

'But perhaps he never will marry,' argued Ellen coolly.

'O, yes, he will, Miss Carley,' replied Mrs. Tadman with another significant movement of her head; 'he's set his heart on that, and he's set his heart on the young woman he means to marry.'

'He can't marry her unless she's willing to be his wife, anyhow,' said Ellen, reddening a little.

'O, he'll find a way to make her consent, Miss Carley, depend upon that. Whatever Stephen Whitelaw sets his mind upon, he'll do. But I don't envy that poor young woman; for she'll have a hard life of it at Wyncomb, and a hard master in my cousin Stephen.'

'She must be a very weak-minded young woman if she marries him against her will,' Ellen said laughing, and then ran off to get the tea ready, leaving Mrs. Tadman to her meditations, which were not of a lively nature at the best of times.

That Christmas-day came to an end at last, after a long evening in the oak-parlour enlivened by a solemn game at whist and a ponderous supper of cold sirloin and mince-pies; and looking out at the wintry moonlight, and the shadowy garden and flat waste of farm-land from the narrow casement in her own room, Ellen Carley wondered what those she loved best in the world were doing and thinking of under that moonlit sky. Where was Marian Holbrook, that new-found friend whom she had loved so well, and whose fate remained so profound a mystery? and what was Frank Randall doing, far away in London, where he had gone to fill a responsible position in a large City firm of solicitors, and whence he had promised to return faithful to his first love, as soon as he found himself fairly on the road to a competence wherewith to endow her?

Thus it was that poor Ellen kept the close of

her Christmas-day, looking out over the cold moon-lit fields, and wondering how she was to escape from the persecution of Stephen Whitelaw.

That obnoxious individual had invited Mr. Carley and his daughter to spend New-year's-day at Wyncomb; a display of hospitality so foreign to his character, that it was scarcely strange that Mrs. Tadman opened her eyes and stared aghast as she heard the invitation given. It had been accepted too, much to Ellen's disgust; and her father told her more than once in the course of the ensuing week that she was to put on her best gown, and smarten herself up a bit, on New-year's-day.

'And if you want a new gown, Nell, I don't mind giving it you,' said the bailiff in a burst of generosity, and with the prevailing masculine idea that a new gown was a panacea for all feminine griefs. 'You can walk over to Malsham and buy it any afternoon you like.'

But Ellen did not care for a new gown, and told her father so, with a word or two of thanks for his offer. She did not desire fine dresses; she had indeed been looking over and furbishing-up her wardrobe of late, with a view to that

possible flight of hers, and it was to her cotton working-gowns that she had paid most attention: looking forward to begin a harder life in some stranger's service—ready to endure anything rather than to marry Stephen Whitelaw. And of late the conviction had grown upon her that her father was very much in earnest, and that before long it would be a question whether she should obey him, or be turned out of doors. She had seen his dealings with other people, and she knew him to be a passionate determined man, hard as iron in his anger.

'I won't give him the trouble to turn me out of doors,' Ellen said to herself. 'When I know his mind, and that there's no hope of turning him, I'll get away quietly, and find some new home. He has no real power over me, and I have but to earn my own living to be independent of him. And I don't suppose Frank will think any the worse of me for having been a servant,' thought the girl, with something like a sob. It seemed hard that she must needs sink lower in her lover's eyes, when she was so far beneath him already; he a lawyer's son, a gentleman by education; and she an untaught country-girl.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PADLOCKED DOOR AT WYNCOMB.

The countenance of the new year was harsh, rugged, and gloomy—as of a stony-hearted, strong-minded new year, that had no idea of making his wintry aspect pleasant, or brightening the gloom of his infancy with any deceptive gleams of January sunshine. A bitter north wind made a dreary howling among the leafless trees, and swept across the broad bare fields with merciless force—a bleak cruel new-year's-day, on which to go out a-pleasuring; but it was more in harmony with Ellen Carley's thoughts than brighter weather could have been; and she went to and fro about her morning's work, up and down cold windy passages, and in and out of the frozen dairy, unmoved by the bitter wind which swept the crisp waves of dark brown hair from her low brows, and tinged the tip of her impertinent little nose with a faint wintry bloom.

The bailiff was in very high spirits this first morning of the new year—almost uproarious spirits indeed, which vented themselves in snatches of boisterous song, as he bustled backwards and forwards from house to stables, dressed in his best blue coat and bright buttons and a capacious buff waistcoat; with his ponderous nether limbs clothed in knee-cords, and boots with vinegar tops; looking altogether the typical British farmer.

Those riotous bursts of song made his daughter shudder. Somehow, his gaiety was more alarming to her than his customary morose humour. It was all the more singular, too, because of late William Carley had been especially silent and moody, with the air of a man whose mind is weighed down by some heavy burden—so gloomy indeed, that his daughter had questioned him more than once, entreating to know if he were distressed by any secret trouble, anything going wrong about the farm, and so on. The girl had only brought upon herself harsh angry answers by these considerate inquiries, and had been told to mind her own business, and not pry into matters that in no way concerned her.

'But it does concern me to see you down-hearted, father,' she answered gently.

'Does it really, my girl? What! your father's something more than a stranger to you, is he? I shouldn't have thought it, seeing how you've gone again me in some things lately. Howsomedever, when I want your help, I shall know how to ask for it, and I hope you'll give it freely. I don't want fine words; they never pulled anybody out of the ditch that I've heard tell of.'

Whatever the bailiff's trouble had been, it seemed to be lightened to-day, Ellen thought; and yet that unusual noisy gaiety of his gave her an uncomfortable feeling: it did not seem natural or easy.

Her household work was done by noon, and she dressed hurriedly, while her father called for her impatiently from below—standing at the foot of the wide bare old staircase, and bawling up to her that they should be late at Wyncomb. She looked very pretty in her neat dark-blue merino dress and plain linen-collar, when she came tripping downstairs at last, flushed with the hurry of her toilet, and altogether so bright a creature that it seemed a hard thing she should not be setting

out upon some real pleasure-trip, instead of that most obnoxious festival to which she was summoned.

Her father looked at her with a grim kind of approval.

'You'll do well enough, lass,' he said; 'but I should like you to have had something smarter than that blue stuff. I wouldn't have minded a couple of pounds or so to buy you a silk gown. But you'll be able to buy yourself as many silk gowns as ever you like by and by, if you play your cards well and don't make a fool of yourself.'

Ellen knew what he meant well enough, but did not care to take any notice of the speech. The time would soon come, no doubt, when she must take her stand in direct opposition to him, and in the mean while it would be worse than foolish to waste breath in idle squabbling.

They were to drive to Wyncomb in the bailiff's gig; rather an obsolete vehicle, with a yellow body, a mouldy leather apron, and high wheels picked-out with red, drawn by a tall gray horse that did duty with the plough on ordinary occasions. Stephen Whitelaw's house was within an easy walk of the Grange; but the gig was a more

dignified mode of approach than a walk, and the bailiff insisted on driving his daughter to her suitor's abode in that conveyance.

Wyncomb was a long low gray-stone house, of an unknown age; a spacious habitation enough, with many rooms, and no less than three staircases, but possessing no traces of that fallen grandeur which pervaded the Grange. It had been nothing better than a farmhouse from time immemorial, and had been added-to and extended and altered to suit the convenience of successive generations of farmers. It was a gloomy-looking house at all times, Ellen Carley thought, but especially gloomy under that leaden winter sky; a house which it would have been almost impossible to associate with pleasant family gatherings or the joyous voices of young children; a grim desolate-looking house, that seemed to freeze the passing traveller with its cold blank stare, as if its gloomy portal had a voice to say to him, 'However lost you may be for lack of shelter, however weary for want of rest, come not here!'

Idle fancies, perhaps; but they were the thoughts with which Wyncomb Farmhouse always inspired Ellen Carley.

'The place just suits its master's hard miserly nature,' she said. 'One would think it had been made on purpose for him; or perhaps the Whitelaws have been like that from generation to generation.'

There was no such useless adornment as a flower-garden at Wyncomb. Stephen Whitelaw cared about as much for roses and lilies as he cared for Greek poetry or Beethoven's sonatas. At the back of the house there was a great patch of bare shadowless ground devoted to cabbages and potatoes, with a straggling border of savoury herbs; a patch not even divided from the farmland beyond, but melting imperceptibly into a field of mangel-wurzel. There were no superfluous hedges upon Mr. Whitelaw's dominions; not a solitary tree to give shelter to the tired cattle in the long hot summer days. Noble old oaks and patriarch beeches, tall sycamores and grand flowering chestnuts, had been stubbed-up remorselessly by that economical agriculturist; and he was now the proud possessor of one of the ugliest and most profitable farms in Hampshire.

In front of the gray-stone house the sheep browsed up to the parlour windows, and on both

sides of the ill-kept carriage-drive leading from the white gate that opened into the meadow to the door of Mr. Whitelaw's abode. No sweet-scented woodbine or pale monthly roses beautified the front of the house in spring- or summer-time. The neglected ivy had overgrown one end of the long stone building and crept almost to the ponderous old chimneys; and this decoration, which had come of itself, was the only spot of greenery about the place. Five tall poplars grew in a row about a hundred yards from the front windows; these, strange to say, Mr. Whitelaw had suffered to remain. They served to add a little extra gloom to the settled grimness of the place, and perhaps harmonised with his tastes.

Within Wyncomb Farmhouse was no more attractive than without. The rooms were low and dark; the windows, made obscure by means of heavy woodwork and common glass, let in what light they did admit with a grudging air, and seemed to frown upon the inmates of the chamber they were supposed to beautify. There were all manner of gloomy passages, and unexpected flights of half-a-dozen stairs or so, in

queer angles of the house, and there was a prevailing darkness everywhere; for the Whitelaws of departed generations, objecting to the window-tax, had blocked up every casement that it was possible to block up; and the stranger exploring Wyncomb Farmhouse was always coming upon those blank plastered windows, which had an unpleasant ghostly aspect, and set him longing for a fireman's hatchet to hew them open and let in the light of day.

The furniture was of the oldest, black with age, worm-eaten, ponderous; queer old fourpost bedsteads, with dingy hangings of greenish brown or yellowish green, from which every vestige of the original hue had faded long ago; clumsy bureaus, and stiff high-backed chairs with thick legs and gouty feet, heavy to move and uncomfortable to sit upon. The house was clean enough, and the bare floors of the numerous bedchambers, which were only enlivened here and there with small strips or bands of Dutch carpet, sent up a homely odour of soft-soap; for Mrs. Tadman took a fierce delight in cleaning, and the solitary household drudge who toiled under her orders had a hard time of it. There

was a dismal kind of neatness about everything, and a bleak empty look in the sparsely-furnished rooms, which wore no pleasant sign of occupation, no look of home. The humblest cottage, with four tiny square rooms and a thatched roof, and just a patch of old-fashioned garden with a sweetbrier hedge and roses growing here and there among the cabbages, would have been a pleasanter habitation than Wyncomb, Ellen Carley thought.

Mr. Whitelaw exhibited an unwonted liberality upon this occasion. The dinner was a ponderous banquet, and the dessert a noble display of nuts and oranges, figs and almonds and raisins, flanked by two old-fashioned decanters of port and sherry; and both the bailiff and his host did ample justice to the feast. It was a long dreary afternoon of eating and drinking; and Ellen was not sorry to get away from the prim wainscoted parlour, where her father and Mr. Whitelaw were solemnly sipping their wine, to wander over the house with Mrs. Tadman.

It was about four o'clock when she slipped quietly out of the room at that lady's invitation, and the lobbies and long passages had a shadowy

look in the declining light. There was light enough for her to see the rooms, however; for there were no rare collections of old china, no pictures or adornments of any kind, to need a minute inspection.

'It's a fine old place, isn't it?' asked Mrs. Tadman. 'There's not many farmers can boast of such a house as Wyncomb.'

'It's large enough,' Ellen answered, with a tone which implied the reverse of admiration; 'but it's not a place I should like to live in. I'm not one to believe in ghosts or such nonsense, but if I could have any such foolish thoughts, I should have them here. The house looks as if it was haunted, somehow.'

Mrs. Tadman laughed a shrill hard laugh, and rubbed her skinny hands with an air of satisfaction.

'You're not easy to please, Miss Earley,' she said; 'most folks think a deal of Wyncomb; for, you see, it's only them that live in a house as can know how dull it is; and as to the place being haunted, I never heard tell of anything of that kind. The Whitelaws ain't the kind of people to come back to this world, unless they

could come to fetch their money, and then they'd come fast enough, I warrant. I used to see a good deal of my uncle, John Whitelaw, when I was a girl, and never did a son take after his father closer than my cousin Stephen takes after him; just the same saving prudent ways, and just the same masterful temper, always kept under in that quiet way of his.'

As Ellen Carley showed herself profoundly indifferent to the lights and shades of Mr. Whitelaw's character, Mrs. Tadman did not pursue the subject, but with a gentle sigh led the way to another room, and so on from room to room, till they had explored all that floor of the house.

'There's the attics above; but you won't care to see *them*,' she said. 'The shepherd and five other men sleep up there. Stephen thinks it keeps them steadier sleeping under the same roof with their master; and he's able to ring them up of a morning, and to know when they go to their work. It's wearying for me to have to get up and see to their breakfasts, but I can't trust Martha Holden to do that, or she'd let them eat us out of house and home. There's no knowing what men like that can eat, and a side of

bacon would go as fast as if you was to melt it down to tallow. But you must know what they are, Miss Carley, having to manage for your father.'

'Yes,' Ellen answered, 'I'm used to hard work.'

'Ah,' murmured the matron, with a sigh, 'you'd have plenty of it, if you came here.'

They were at the end of a long passage by this time; a passage leading to the extreme end of the house, and forming part of that ivy-covered wing which seemed older than the rest of the building. It was on a lower level than the other part, and they had descended two or three steps at the entrance to this passage. The ceilings were lower too, the beams that supported them more massive, the diamond-paned windows smaller and more heavily leaded, and there was a faint musty odour as of a place that was kept shut up and uninhabited.

'There's nothing more to see here,' said Mrs. Tadman quickly; 'we'd better go back. I don't know what brought me here; it was talking, I suppose, made me come without thinking. There's nothing to show you this way.'

'But there's another room there,' Ellen said, pointing to a door just before them — a heavy clumsily-made door, painted black.

'That room—well, yes; it's a kind of a room, but hasn't been used for fifty years and more, I've heard say. Stephen keeps seeds there and suchlike. It's always locked, and he keeps the key of it.'

There was nothing in this closed room to excite either curiosity or interest in Ellen's mind, and she was turning away from the door with perfect indifference, when she started and suddenly seized Mrs. Tadman's arm.

'Hark!' she said, in a frightened, breathless way; 'did you hear that?'

'What, child?'

'Did you say there was no one in there—no one?'

'Lord bless your heart, no, Miss Carley, nor ever is. What a turn you did give me, grasping hold of my arm like that!'

'I heard something in there—a footstep. It must be the servant.'

'What, Martha Holden! I should like to see her venturing into any room Stephen keeps

private to himself. Besides, that door's kept locked; try it, and satisfy yourself.'

The door was indeed locked; a door with a clumsy old-fashioned latch, securely fastened by a staple and padlock. Ellen tried it with her own hand.

'Is there no other door to the room?' she asked.

'None; and only one window, that looks into the woodyard, and is almost always blocked up with the wood piled outside it. You must have heard the muslin bags of seeds blowing about, if you heard anything.'

'I heard a footstep,' said Ellen firmly; 'a human footstep. I told you the house was haunted, Mrs. Tadman.'

'Lor, Miss Carley, I wish you wouldn't say such things; it's enough to make one's blood turn cold. Do come downstairs and have a cup of tea. It's quite dark, I declare; and you've given me the shivers with your queer talk.'

'I'm sorry for that; but the noise I heard must have been either real or ghostly, and you won't believe it's real.'

'It was the seed-bags, of course.'

'They couldn't make a noise like human footsteps. However, it's no business of mine, Mrs. Tadman, and I don't want to frighten you.'

They went downstairs to the parlour, where the tea-tray and a pair of candles were soon brought, and where Mrs. Tadman stirred the fire into a blaze with an indifference to the consumption of fuel which made her kinsman stare, even on that hospitable and peculiar occasion. The blaze made the dark wainscoted room cheerful of aspect, however, which the two candles could not have done, as their light was almost absorbed by the gloomy panelling.

After tea there was whist again, and a considerable consumption of spirits-and-water on the part of the two gentlemen, in which Mrs. Tadman joined modestly, with many protestations, and with the air of taking only an occasional spoonful contrived to empty her tumbler, and allowed herself to be persuaded to take another by the bailiff, whose joviality on this occasion was inexhaustible.

The day's entertainment came to an end at last, to Ellen's inexpressible relief; and her father drove her home in the yellow gig at rather an alarming pace, and with some tendency towards

heeling over into a ditch. They got over the brief journey safely, however, and Mr. Carley was still in high good humour. He went off to see to the putting-up of his horse himself, telling his daughter to wait till he came back: he had something particular to say to her before she went to bed.

END OF VOL. II.

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